

◆Holmes of Kyoto◆

~Skyscraper
Temptations~

HOWARD ST

ONE WAY

NO STANDING
ANYTIME

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14

Mai Mochizuki



Holmes of Kyoto

~Skyscraper
Temptations~

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NO STANDING
ANYTIME

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Mai Mochizuki

Kiyotaka Yagashira

Nicknamed “Holmes,” he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. He is currently undergoing training to learn about the outside world before taking over the antique store Kura.

Aoi Mashiro

A second-year university student who moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama and began working part-time at the antique store Kura. She is developing her potential as an appraiser under Kiyotaka’s guidance.





Akihito Kajiwara

An up-and-coming young actor. He has good looks but also tends to be the comic relief.



Rikyu Takiyama

Kiyotaka's younger brother figure. He admires Kiyotaka so much that he used to be averse to Aoi, but...

Ensho

His real name is Shinya Sugawara. He is a former counterfeiter and Kiyotaka's archnemesis, but after a series of twists and turns, he is now studying as an apprentice of a famous appraiser.



Seiji Yagashira (Owner)

Kiyotaka's grandfather. He is a nationally certified appraiser and the owner of Kura.

Yoshie Takiyama

Rikyu's mother and the owner's girlfriend. She is a career woman who runs an art-related business and has a first-class architect license.



Takeshi Yagashira (Manager)

Kiyotaka's father. He is a popular writer of historical novels.



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Prologue: At a Loss

I've been really anguished lately, but I'm not quite sure why.

I, Aoi Mashiro, had been spacing out behind the counter at the antique store Kura, a book open in front of me, when the door chime rang.

"E-Excuse me," said the visitor, my best friend Kaori Miyashita. She stepped inside and timidly looked around.

"Welcome, Kaori. I'm here by myself today."

"That's what I thought since I only saw you." She sat at the counter and looked down at my book. Apparently she had only come in after checking the state of the store from outside. "Oh, are you studying English for your New York trip?"

"Yeah." I nodded. I had been reading a book on conversational English. "Holmes got me a translation device, but I want to study a bit too."

"How admirable."

"It's not that impressive. Even if I try now, I won't be able to learn much. It's more likely that it'll end up being a waste of time."

I'd been interested in foreign countries for a while now. You could even say I'd been longing to go abroad. Seeing Holmes go overseas with the owner made me think, "How nice." So I'd been studying English to some extent, but I hadn't made a serious attempt. If I'd known I was going to get this chance, I would've taken conversational English classes.

Kaori shook her head as I was reflecting on what I could've done better. "That's not true," she said.

"Huh?"

"It's not a waste at all. If you learn one English word a day, that means you'll master three hundred and sixty-five words in a year. I think it's the gradual accumulation that matters. Like they say, Rome wasn't built in a day." She held

up her index finger.

“Yeah, it’s not a waste.” I nodded.

Suddenly, I thought of Holmes. He may have been born with an extraordinary eye for observation and appraisal, but his wealth of knowledge had been accumulated ever since he was a child. You could say that Kiyotaka Yagashira wasn’t built in a day either. My face relaxed into a smile as I imagined him holding his index finger in front of his mouth and grinning somewhat proudly.

Kaori gave me a dubious look.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“It’s nothing.”

Did my thoughts show on my face? I unconsciously rubbed my cheek and straightened my expression.

“I bet you’re excited since you’re leaving soon,” said Kaori.

“I am, but I’m also really nervous.”

“About English? You’ll manage somehow.”

English wasn’t the only concern on my mind, but it was certainly one of them.

“You’re good at English, so it doesn’t feel convincing coming from you,” I mumbled. English had been Kaori’s strong subject since high school, and in university, she was majoring in European and American linguistic cultures.

“I’m not *good* at it.”

“But your highest grades are in English, aren’t they?”

“Oh...” she murmured, placing a hand on her head. “That’s just because I like it. I became a fan of English because my favorite uncle lives in England.”

I’d heard this story before. Kaori didn’t get along well with her father, but she admired her kind and gentlemanly uncle.

“Since I like it, my studies are productive,” she continued. “I’d thought it would be helpful overseas since it’s my best subject, but when I actually went, it was no good at all.” She gave a dramatic shrug.

“Do you mean when you went to Australia?” I asked. Kaori had done a brief study program in Australia over the summer break.

“Yeah. I don’t know if it was a pronunciation issue, but people over there didn’t understand me at all. There were a lot of times when I spoke in Japanese on impulse and that got across better. So I don’t think you need to be so nervous,” she said with a cheerful smile.

“I see. I guess I shouldn’t feel bad if even your level isn’t enough to communicate with. Oh right. So, how was Australia?” I asked, suddenly remembering. We’d both been too busy to have a proper chat about her trip.

Kaori shut her eyes tightly and replied, “It was incredible.” The sheer passion in her words told me it had been a great experience, which made me feel happy too.

“So it was a nice place, then.”

“Yeah. My host family was really good to me, and they had a little boy and girl who were just adorable.” She took her phone out as she spoke and showed me a picture of a kind-looking Caucasian couple and a five-or six-year-old boy and girl, all smiling happily. Kaori was right in the middle of them. “I was born and raised here in cramped Kyoto, so Australia’s vastness felt really new. They had a huge yard with a handmade swing and a little swimming pool. We had barbecues, made a bonfire, and went to the beach. They took me horseback riding too.”

I nodded as I listened to her elated recollection. Japan was cramped to begin with, but Kyoto was especially known for its even smaller neighborhood layouts and narrower streets. Australia could be considered the exact opposite.

“Where in Australia did you go, by the way?” I asked.

“It was a place called Perth.”

“Perth?” I tilted my head at the unfamiliar name. I’d assumed she would’ve gone to Sydney, Canberra, or Melbourne. “Whereabouts is that?”

“Oh, it’s in the southwest part.” Kaori opened a map of Australia on her phone. Sure enough, Perth was located on the south side of the western coast. “It was a really nice place. It’s close to the ocean and it suddenly becomes really

spacious once you leave the downtown area. I also got to go to Uluru, which is right in the middle of Australia. I only saw it from a distance, but it was really nice too.”

“Uluru is Ayers Rock, right?”

“Yep. It’s the landmark that people call a monolith.”

I vaguely imagined the scene in my mind. My impression of Uluru was a huge reddish-brown rock that was like a small mountain standing imposingly in the middle of an endless plain.

“I’ve seen it on TV and in books, but before going there myself, I thought, ‘It might be big, but it’s still just a rock,’” said Kaori.

“I know what you mean.” I nodded with a serious expression. Hearing the word “monolith” didn’t give me a sense of how great it was either. I just thought of it as a big rock.

“But when I saw it for myself, I was so moved. It was gigantic and the horizon went on forever. I really thought, ‘Wow, I am so small. I only know a tiny sliver of the world.’” Tears rose to her eyes as she recalled the emotional event.

“You really had a great experience, huh? I’m glad you got to go,” I said sincerely.

“Yeah,” Kaori replied shyly.

“I was surprised when you suddenly decided to study short-term in Australia, though.”

“Actually, Kohinata suggested it because I was feeling depressed about some things,” she said quietly, almost in a whisper.

“Huh?” My eyes widened. “Kohinata did?”

“Yeah.” Kaori gave an awkward nod.

Keigo Kohinata was Holmes’s former schoolmate. He was a charming young man with short hair and glasses, and he was currently a medical researcher at a graduate school.

“Before summer break, I was complaining to him that I wanted to go

somewhere far away and look at the horizon. Then he suggested studying abroad. Even the host family I stayed with was introduced to me by someone he knew.” Her voice grew quieter as she spoke, as if she was embarrassed.

“I see...” *So Kohinata was involved in her sudden decision to study abroad.* “Are you going out with him now?” I hadn’t meant to ask that so bluntly, but the truth surprised me so much that I ended up doing it without thinking.

Kaori shook her head weakly. “He actually asked me out again when I came back to Japan.”

“Really?” I unconsciously leaned forward.

“Yeah, but I turned him down.”

“Oh...” I felt a little disappointed. Kohinata was a great, levelheaded person. I’d thought they might be a good match.

“Love is so complicated.”

“Complicated?”

“Yeah. Kohinata is really nice to me, and I’m grateful for and touched by how supportive he is. I even felt happy that he was trying to get closer to me.”

“Right.”

“But when he actually asks me out, I feel troubled. I admire him, but it doesn’t feel like love. He’s more like a dependable older brother. It’d be so much easier if I could just love him.”

I felt like I could understand her complex state of emotions. Love probably isn’t something that can be explained by logic. No matter how good the person is or how happy you are that they think of you that way, it’s possible that your heart won’t be swayed.

We both fell silent. After a little while, Kaori awkwardly began, “You might’ve noticed, Aoi...”

Sensing that it was a serious matter, I looked at her without saying anything.

“Not that long ago, and only for a little while, I was going out with the manager. Oh, but we didn’t go beyond holding hands,” she said in a hushed

voice even though we were alone in the store.

As she'd suspected, I had known. I had never expected her to reveal it to me herself, though. My heart pounded.

"And you know exactly how it ended up," she continued.

I remembered our conversation at Hakusan Shrine. Kaori had thought she was in love with the manager, but upon realizing that she only admired him, she had ended their relationship. Thinking of his feelings, she had blamed herself and broken down in tears.

I nodded, unable to say anything.

"I'm sorry for what I did to him, but I do think meeting him and going out with him were invaluable experiences."

"Yeah." I nodded again.

"But I still feel guilty about hurting him, and I feel like I've become even more cowardly about love than I was before. So I can't just think, 'Kohinata's a good person and I do feel positively towards him, so I'll try going out with him for now,'" she murmured with a self-deprecating smile.

"I know how you feel..." I had become a coward after breaking up with my ex-boyfriend too.

If Kaori had been a blank slate when she met Kohinata, they might have ended up in a relationship. But at this point, she couldn't easily switch mindsets. That also meant her feelings for Kohinata weren't strong enough to make her switch. Perhaps timing was important in love.

We fell silent again.

"A-Anyway, I want to hear about your New York trip too, Aoi." She seemed ready to change the subject.

"Oh, right." I remembered that I'd only given her a brief description since I'd wanted to explain the details in person.

"The offer came via Yoshie, right?"

"Yeah." I nodded.

Yoshie Takiyama was the owner's girlfriend. She ran an art-related consulting business and was also a licensed first-class architect who took on architectural design work.

"It was a pretty long time ago now, but there was a gathering of appraisers at Rikyu's grandfather's house," I began. Rikyu was Yoshie's son. "One of them was a woman named Keiko Fujiwara, who's a curator in New York."

"Oh, that was at Saito's house in Takagamine, right? When he was choosing his successor."

"Right." I nodded, realizing that I could skip a lot of the explanation. I'd known Kaori for a long time, so I'd already told her about a lot of the things that had happened. "Keiko's mentor is Sally Barrymore, an influential person in the art world."

"That name sounds familiar," Kaori murmured.

Even I had heard the name before. And after looking her up, I had learned that she had been the chief curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (commonly referred to as the Met) for some years before going freelance. Freelance curators were also called independent curators, so Sally now toured museums and exhibitions around the world, planning, proposing, and supervising projects. She had several apprentices, and Keiko Fujiwara was one of them.

"A while back, Sally was infuriated by a male curator who told her, 'We don't need women in this world,'" I explained.

Kaori gave an exasperated sigh. "I guess there are people like that everywhere."

"Yeah..." I nodded, feeling bitter.

Sally had been angry for a while, but the insult had inspired her to train other women who had the potential to become excellent curators. She first instructed her apprentices, "Bring me budding female curators from your country who you think have potential."

"I see," Kaori said, nodding in response to my recap of events. "So that Keiko Fujiwara person had to bring a budding curator to Sally, and she asked you via

Yoshie,” she summarized.

“Right.”

“Did Yoshie and Keiko already know each other?”

“Yeah. Yoshie is an art consultant, so they’ve met before.”

“It’s amazing that you were chosen for this, Aoi. Congrats again.”

I gave a modest shrug. “I think it’s more that Keiko hasn’t met any other budding female curators.”

Keiko had once tried to make a move on Holmes and was given the cold shoulder, so I didn’t think she had a good impression of me. I remembered the suggestive things she’d said to me at the Saito residence. The fact that she’d given me this opportunity regardless made me doubt she had any other candidates.

“There’s no way,” said Kaori. “Your trip is five days and three nights, right?”

I smiled awkwardly and said, “That was the original plan. I figured if I went during the fall three-day weekend, I’d only have to miss two days of school, and Yoshie thought it’d be fine too. But later, Keiko said, ‘Sally liked your report, so she wants you to stay a little longer.’ Now I’ll be going for ten days, including travel time.”

“What report?”

“I had to submit a report on my country’s art beforehand.”

I had chosen to write about Japan’s beautiful cloisonné ware, including the story of the artists known as the two Namikawas: Yasuyuki Namikawa and Sosuke Namikawa. I’d heard from Yoshie that Sally’s assistants had selected quite a few budding curators this time around, but not all of them could be invited. Sally had rejected many of them after reading the reports.

“That’s like narrowing down applications for an audition. But since you’re going all the way to New York, isn’t it a good thing that you can stay longer? I know you don’t want to miss school, but you’ve been earning all your credits so far, and besides, this kind of thing is a great educational experience too. Anyway, if you’re ‘invited,’ does that mean Sally’s paying for your

transportation and hotel?”

“Yeah. I was told that she would provide everything.”

“She must be rich, huh?”

“It seems so. And since Yoshie will be going with me, my parents approved.”

“Well, of course they would,” Kaori said, resting her chin on her hand. “What does Sally plan on doing once she’s gathered these budding curators, anyway?”

“She’s going to give lectures and hold discussions at her home salon. She’ll also take us on a tour of New York’s art museums.”

“That sounds fun. So while you’re in America, Holmes will be staying in Japan. It’s the opposite of the usual, huh?” Kaori giggled.

“Oh, about that...” I looked up. “Holmes is going to be leaving Japan too.”

Kaori blinked. “Is he accompanying the owner again?”

I shook my head. “No, he’ll be going to China—Shanghai—for work.”

“Whoa. What kind of work?”

“Well...” I began to explain what had happened the other day, when Kura had received an unusual visitor.

Yilin Jing had turned up at Kura out of the blue and requested that Holmes go to Shanghai as an appraiser. The reason was that her father was going to hold an exhibition of treasures from all over the world at the Shanghai Museum. It would harm his reputation if there were any counterfeits there, so they had decided to invite appraisers from around the world. At first, they had reached out to the owner, but the owner had told them to take his apprentice-grandson Kiyotaka instead. And so, Holmes was bound for Shanghai. Strangely enough, he was also going to be accompanied by Komatsu and Ensho.

“So Holmes will be leaving before me to Shanghai.”

Kaori’s eyes widened at the unexpected turn of events. “Huh, so you two are going abroad at around the same time. That’s an amazing coincidence.”

“Yeah.” I laughed.

“What did Holmes say when he found out you were going to New York?”

“He was happy for me. He said, ‘That’s a great opportunity.’ And...”

“And?” Kaori tilted her head.

“He also said, ‘I’d love to go with you if I’m allowed to.’”

“Huh? Holmes is going with you? Oh, but he’s going to Shanghai, so he can’t.”

“Right, that conversation was before the Shanghai request came. But I turned down his offer...”

Kaori’s eyes widened again. She must’ve not been expecting that. “Why? What could be better than going to New York with your boyfriend?”

I looked down, not sure how to answer.

“I’ve actually been worried...” she continued.

“About what?”

“Um, Aoi...are you maybe falling out of love with Holmes?” Kaori asked hesitantly in a quiet voice.

I choked on my breath.

“I think it’s too soon to get engaged when you’re still in school. Feelings can change, after all.”

“No, my feelings haven’t changed.” I shook my head.

Her expression softened. “Oh, that’s a relief.”

“A relief?” I asked, confused. Kaori was wary of Holmes, so if we were to break up, I would’ve expected her to say, “I’m so glad; I always thought he was dangerous.”

“I don’t like interacting with Holmes, but he shows his human side when he’s with you, so I don’t dislike him. I think you two make a good match. Most of all, he definitely seems like he’d become a total wreck if you broke up,” she muttered, grimacing as if imagining something terrifying.

“A total wreck?” I burst out laughing.

I was honestly glad she thought that way, but there was a part of me that couldn't freely rejoice over those words. In the past, I had been more straightforward in my admiration and pining for Holmes, but now, my feelings were a bit different.

"So why, then?" Kaori asked again.

Still unsure of how to respond, I stumbled as I began to try to explain. "Holmes is a really big part of my life. I love him, of course, and he's also my teacher. Sometimes he feels like a guardian too."

"Yeah."

"When he's with me, I end up relying on him, and sometimes, I feel like I even let him make my decisions for me. So this time, I want to try my best without him."

"I get it." Kaori nodded firmly. "That's so admirable."

"I-Is it?"

"He's such a perfect guy; anyone would want to rely on him for everything. It's just easier that way. But you turned down his offer, and you're trying to stand firm on your own feet, and that's admirable." She nodded. "By the way, what did he say when you refused to let him go with you?"

"He said, 'I understand. Enjoy your trip and do your best.'"

"Ahh, that's so slick."

I said nothing. In reality, he hadn't been slick. He was probably in quite the state of shock. He looked like an abandoned puppy with his teary eyes, and you'd think the world was ending with how depressed his face was. But once we were alone, he'd jumped on me like a big dog, shouting "Aoi!" as if to cast off the shock. He was anything but a perfect guy, but I preferred that over being cool at all times. It let me feel at ease.

"You're so lucky to have an understanding and supportive partner, Aoi," Kaori said earnestly.

"Yeah." I nodded and smiled at her.

We chatted a bit more, and then Kaori left the store. I looked at the clock and saw that it was six in the evening. I had been given permission to close the store early today. After doing so, I took out my phone and sent Holmes a message: *"I just closed the store, so I'm heading to Komatsu Detective Agency now."*

The reply came immediately. *"I'll leave the office too, then. Let's meet up at Shijo Street."*

"Okay." I put my phone in my bag and went outside. The shopping street was rather busy at this time of evening. As I walked south down Teramachi Street, I mumbled, *"I couldn't tell Kaori..." Even though she confided in me regarding something that was difficult to talk about.* Then again, I couldn't tell her about it because I still hadn't sorted out the problem in my own head. There was another reason I had declined to let Holmes come with me to New York.

I clenched my fists and looked down as I recalled a certain event. It had been shortly before the New York talks had come up.

*

It was early September. Holmes had already begun his training at Komatsu's office, but the detective agency was closed on this particular day, so he was working at Kura instead.

I turned off the air conditioner and opened the window to let in some fresh air. A pleasant breeze blew into the store. Now that it was September, the heat was finally starting to die down a bit.

"It's more comfortable these days, huh?" I remarked.

"Indeed," Holmes said with a smile. He was checking the inventory, clipboard in hand.

The door chime rang and someone came inside.

"Hey, Kiyotaka." It was Ueda, wearing a suit as usual and carrying a briefcase and a paper bag. He hung his jacket on the back of a chair and loosened his tie as he sat down. *"Phew, it's hot."*

The weather might be nicer now, but it's still going to be hot if you have to walk around outside in a suit.

“Welcome, Ueda,” I said. “I can hang your jacket up for you.”

“Thanks, but I’m good. Are you still on summer break, Aoi?”

“Yes, although it’s almost over.”

Holmes smoothly walked behind the counter and began preparing drinks as usual. “Shall I make it iced coffee today?” he asked.

“Appreciate it,” said Ueda. “Oh, but first, there’s something I want you to look at for me.” He gleefully held up a hand. From the look of it, he’d brought in a piece of art for the first time in a while—one that he was quite confident in.

As I was eagerly wondering what he’d brought, Holmes shrugged and asked, “What is it this time?” He didn’t seem to be expecting anything worthwhile.

“Hmph, something that’ll blow your mind. See for yourself,” said Ueda, taking a cloth-wrapped package out of his paper bag and placing it on the counter. Judging from the size, it was probably a tea bowl.

Holmes hummed, took his gloves out of his pocket, and put them on. “Allow me to take a look, then.” He carefully unwrapped the package, revealing a wooden box. Both the box and the string tied around it were brand new.

“It didn’t come with a box, so that’s new,” Ueda explained before anyone could comment on it.

“I see,” replied Holmes, untying the string and opening the lid. His eyebrow twitched as he peered inside. He wordlessly removed his gloves and gently picked up the tea bowl.

When Holmes wants to perform a very thorough appraisal, he takes off his gloves and touches the item directly. What could’ve been inside that box?

I unconsciously craned my neck to look at the round blackish object. It was a small tea bowl that fit snugly in Holmes’s large hands. At a glance, it seemed like a tenmoku tea bowl.

When Holmes placed it on the counter, I immediately peered at the inner view—the center of the inner surface—and gasped in shock. The jet-black surface was studded with blotted soap bubbles that shimmered like the northern lights. The sparkles in the tea bowl seemed to represent the universe.

I had seen pieces like this before, in museums. They were yohen tenmoku tea bowls—a national treasure. At present, there were only three of them in the world.

As I looked at the item on the counter, I thought back to the yohen tenmoku tea bowls I'd seen in museums.

The three had been displayed in separate museums. The first one I'd seen was at Kyoto's Daitoku-ji Ryoko-in Temple.

"It's smaller than I expected."

That was my first impression upon seeing it from afar. It was a size smaller than the bowls I ate rice with. The outside was jet black, but unlike Raku tea bowls, it was a glossy black.

After a long wait in line, I finally arrived at the display case. Upon coming close enough to see the inner view, I was rendered speechless. The universe was inside this tea bowl. A white nebula spanned the jet-black void. The feeling was similar to that of being overwhelmed by the sight of a majestic sunset or a sky full of stars. I was moved as though I were witnessing a miracle of nature—I couldn't believe it was man-made.

"Yohen tenmoku is a miraculous masterpiece, accidentally created during a potter's trial and error," said Holmes.

These tea bowls, which were said to have resulted from the will to create something great combined with various coincidences occurring at once, may have surpassed the realm of human creation, instead being works of art created by the universe.

Later on, Holmes brought me to see the yohen tenmoku tea bowls at Osaka's Fujita Museum and Tokyo's Seikado Bunko Art Museum, which moved me just the same.

Ueda's tea bowl had a pattern different from all three of them, but it was the same in that it evoked the universe with its dazzling spots on a jet-black surface.

What on earth is this? I gulped and looked at Holmes, who looked conflicted.

“This is quite something,” he said softly. “I might even say it’s magnificent.”

When Holmes encounters something good, he’ll call it magnificent with a happy look on his face. But this time, despite calling it magnificent, he’s not openly praising it. What could this tea bowl be?

“They were able to come this close, huh?” he said with a sigh.

“Come close?” I murmured.

Holmes nodded. “More people have been trying to reproduce yohen tenmoku tea bowls in recent years. Instead of using lead, which is harmful to the human body, they pour titanium dioxide onto the surface of the tea bowl and fire it in an electric kiln where they can specify a temperature. I once read a paper in which repeated research showed that a firing temperature of 1,260 to 1,270 degrees Celsius was ideal for melting the core well. I’ve also seen several attempts at yohen tenmoku reproductions in the past, but none were to the extent of this one. As a reproduction, I’d say it could be considered a masterpiece.”

Ueda slumped onto the counter as if he were melting.

“Ueda, are you shocked to find out it’s a reproduction when you thought it was real?” I asked, worried that he might’ve paid a large sum for the tea bowl.

“No,” he mumbled. “Like Holmes said, it’s a reproduction. My friend’s an associate professor at a university and he made it with his students as a research project. He was inspired by a successful reproduction by a student at a technical high school. After a lot of research, they were able to come up with this. I figured even Holmes would be fooled by it, or even if he wasn’t, he’d make a puzzled face for a while, but alas.”

Ueda hung his head, resting his chin on his hand. He must’ve come here proudly, thinking he’d make Holmes flustered, only to have the tables turned on him.

“But Holmes took off his gloves,” I said. “Maybe he thought it was real for a second.”

This tea bowl had baffled me. Perhaps Holmes had been a little shaken as well.

“No.” Holmes shook his head. “I’ve never touched a yohen tenmoku reproduction, so I wanted to see what it felt like. I knew from its appearance whether or not it was real,” he said nonchalantly, looking down at the tea bowl.

While I had been captivated by the spectacular reproduction, Holmes had already determined its authenticity from its appearance.

“I see...” I said with a small nod.

“It really is impressive, though,” Holmes murmured earnestly.

“Uh-huh,” said Ueda, annoyed. “This comes from a genuine wish to revive yohen tenmoku in the modern age. At this point, can’t we just call it yohen tenmoku for real?”

Holmes chuckled. “Well, it’s *modern-age* yohen tenmoku.”

“If it’s recognized as that, can it be added as the fourth yohen tenmoku tea bowl?”

“No, Ueda. Only three yohen tenmoku tea bowls are certified national treasures. There are plenty of other tea bowls out there that have been named ‘yohen.’”

“Huh?”

“There are strict rules that separate the three national treasures from the others. First, they must be top-quality black-glazed tea bowls made in the Jian kilns during the Song dynasty. Second, the inside must have a spotted pattern made up of the traces of burst bubbles. Third, the spots must be bordered by brilliant colors such as violet or ultramarine. Presently, only three tea bowls have been found that meet all of the conditions.”

“I see,” Ueda murmured, dejected. “So that’s how it is. No matter how hard they work to make a good yohen tenmoku tea bowl now, a modern recreation will never become the fourth national treasure. This ain’t the Song dynasty and the Jian kilns don’t exist anymore.”

“Indeed.” Holmes nodded in amusement. “But I think it’s wonderful that they’re trying to reproduce something beautiful. It makes you appreciate the splendor of the ancient national treasures even more.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Ueda’s mood recovered upon hearing that.

“Still, if you were to add years to this, some appraisers might be deceived.”

“Adding years” was the act of aging a new tea bowl by about three hundred years. It was a technique used by counterfeiters, performed by people called “blemishers.”

Ueda’s expression suddenly became grave upon hearing those words.

“What’s wrong?” Holmes asked.

“I heard that some of the yohen tenmoku reproductions went missing, and it’s possible they were stolen. It’ll be a big problem if they get tampered with like you said and circulated as the real thing, huh?”

“Definitely.” Holmes nodded, a grim look on his face too.

Indeed, it would be a big problem if these tea bowls were aged and put into circulation. But at that moment, I was too depressed to be in the same serious mood as Holmes and Ueda. Holmes had instantly identified the reproduction, but I had been alarmed, thinking it might’ve been real. I was devastated.

*

I gave a small sigh as I walked, remembering what had happened that day. Little by little, I had been learning how to determine the authenticity of things, to the point where Ensho thought I’d be able to surpass Holmes. I didn’t think I deserved such a compliment, but I probably did grow complacent, thinking I’d gotten close to Holmes’s level. But then, I was shown just how far apart our abilities were, and it made me feel like I was pushed off my high horse.

At that moment, my heart had very clearly been filled with frustration. But a moment later, I had reined myself in, telling myself I was being impudent. I had undeniably been frustrated, yet at the same time, I felt a strong desire to study more and train my mind’s eye. Thinking about it, that might’ve been when my feelings towards Holmes had become more complicated than just love.

I sighed again, casting my eyes down. As I walked, I heard two young women near me whispering to each other.

“Isn’t that guy pretty cool?”

“Yeah, he has a really good build.”

Celebrities often visit Kyoto. Could there be someone famous in town? What if it's Akihito? I looked up and saw Holmes in front of me. *Oh, they were talking about Holmes.* I was surprised, but it made sense.

“Aoi!” he exclaimed, running up to me excitedly.

“Holmes...” *He really is like a big dog.* My face relaxed into a smile. Then I noticed that he was slightly out of breath. I tilted my head and asked, “Did you run here from the office?”

“Yes. I couldn't wait to see you.”

I choked. *How is he never embarrassed to say these things?* “What? Don't we see each other all the time?”

“Starting tomorrow, we'll be separated for a while.”

“Oh right. You're finally leaving.”

Tomorrow, Holmes is setting out for Shanghai. He'll be there as an appraiser, looking at treasures from all over the world. His eyes might be honed even further. Am I thinking this because I'm impatient? I felt a burning sensation in my chest.

“What's wrong?” Holmes asked, peering curiously into my face as I spaced out.

“Oh, nothing. What should we eat?”

“Well...” he murmured. “If it's all right with you...would you like to have dinner at the apartment in Yasaka? My father is in Tokyo right now.”

“Huh?” I looked in his direction.

“I'll try my hand at cooking for you.” He grinned.

My cheeks instantly felt hot. They were surely bright red. I didn't know what to say.

“Oh, um, if you don't want to, we can eat at a restaurant,” Holmes continued, panicking.

I smiled at how quickly he went from slick to flustered. I shook my head and

looked down as I replied, "Um, I want to cook with you, then."

"Oh no," Holmes whispered, putting his hand over his mouth.

"Huh?"

"I always have to work up a lot of courage when I invite you," he said, his cheeks slightly red. My heart skipped a beat. "Shall we go to the supermarket, then?" he asked, holding out his hand.

I nodded and took his hand. I was happy when we spent time together as a couple. I sincerely loved him. *But...why does it hurt so much?* I closed my eyes and held his hand tighter.

Short Story: Eve of Departure

Holmes had invited me to his apartment near Yasaka Shrine.

“I feel like I haven’t been here in a long time,” I murmured as I stepped into the living room.

This was where Holmes and the manager lived. In the center of the living room, there was an oval-shaped glass table surrounded by cream-colored sofas arranged in an L-shape. The walls were entirely covered by bookshelves, with a large TV inset in one of them. On the other side of the apartment was the kitchen, which had a bar-style counter. All of the furnishings were in subdued colors, with houseplants adding a touch of green.

The apartment was kept very clean and tidy, which was unexpected for a place inhabited by only a father and son. The manager probably had Holmes to thank for that.

The best part was the view from the large window. The sun had just set, and I could see Yasaka Tower under the orange sky.

This was where the manager and Kiyomi (Holmes’s mother) lived as newlyweds...

“I’m only realizing this now, but you grew up in this apartment, didn’t you?” I murmured.

The Yagashira residence near the Philosopher’s Walk was the owner’s house. Holmes lived there sometimes too, but this apartment would’ve been his original home.

“Yes,” Holmes said with a nod.

I gazed at Yasaka Tower and let out a dreamy sigh. “I’m impressed by this luxurious view every time I come here. Did the manager choose this place?”

“I heard that when he got married and was looking for a new place, he asked Ueda and the owner for advice and decided on this apartment. It was Ueda who

found it,” he explained, hanging up his jacket and putting on a black apron.

“Ueda...”

Ueda once told me about the secret feelings he’d harbored for his best friend’s girlfriend, Kiyomi. How did he feel helping them find their new home?

“My father can be quite cruel, can’t he?”

I turned around in surprise. *Had Holmes noticed Ueda’s feelings? That’s probably a stupid question. There’s no way he wouldn’t have.* I chose to drop the subject, giving him a vague smile and heading to the kitchen with him.

Holmes took our dinner ingredients out of the reusable bag and placed them on the counter. Before coming here, we had bought ground meat, onions, carrots, bell peppers, lettuce, tomatoes, and mushrooms from the supermarket. We had mulled over what to make for quite a long time before settling on the classic Hamburg steak.

We carefully washed our hands and looked at each other.

“Shall we begin?”

“Yes!” I nodded.

Despite my enthusiasm going in, I was constantly overwhelmed by Holmes’s skillfulness. Before I knew it, he’d already fried up the plump and delicious-looking Hamburg steaks. All I had helped with was peeling the vegetables, preparing the salad, and getting the plates.

“It’s nice and warm today, so let’s eat outside,” he suggested.

“Huh? Outside?”

“On the balcony. It’s quite spacious.”

I went to the window and looked at the balcony. Indeed, it was wide and spacious. There was a bronze patio set there, and I could tell that the balcony was used from time to time. It really was warm today, so eating there seemed like it would be fun.

“Yes, let’s do that,” I agreed.

We diligently began setting up. Holmes brought a lantern out, wiped the

furniture clean, and put down a tablecloth. I set the table with our plated Hamburg steaks and salad, bread, a basket of cutlery, and two large wine glasses. We sat down in the chairs, filled our glasses with deep red wine, and raised them, saying, "Cheers!"

When I put my knife into the Hamburg steak, juices poured out. I brought the fork to my mouth and savored the rich flavors of the meat and demi-glace sauce.

"It's delicious," I said.

"I'm glad to hear that. Being able to cook and eat together is a blessing."

"I didn't do much, though." I shrugged and sipped my wine. Looking up, I saw the white moon hanging in the azure sky. Below it was Yasaka Tower, seeming mystical with its dim lights. "What a lovely view. Do you eat on the balcony with the manager?"

"No, not together. One of us might drink coffee or wine here by ourselves though."

Now that he mentioned it, I couldn't imagine the two of them having a meal on the balcony together. The Yagashira father and son got along well, but they seemed to maintain a certain distance between them.

"Speaking of the manager, you said he's in Tokyo today. Is it for work?"

"It is, but he's also visiting his foster parents."

"He was raised by the owner's younger brother and his wife, right?"

"Yes. For my father, that would be his uncle's family. He was raised by them until he graduated from high school, and they cared for him very well, so he loves them as if they were his real parents. Now that they're elderly, he often goes to check on them."

"I see. Do you also visit his uncle? I guess for you, he'd be your great-uncle."

"Yes, I drop by when I go to Tokyo. My great-uncle and his wife are both gentle and kind people, and they're very happy when I visit them. My great-uncle is a former music teacher and an expert on string instruments. I look forward to hearing him play whenever I visit."

“So that’s why the manager plays the cello.” I nodded in understanding.

“My father sometimes says that if I get married, he might leave this apartment to me and go back to Tokyo.”

In other words, the manager was considering living with his uncle again. I understood his concern for his elderly foster parents, but... “It’ll be a bit sad to see him go,” I murmured. Then I giggled, remembering that the condition was Holmes getting married. “Well, it won’t be for a long time.”

Holmes silently placed a hand on his forehead.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He lowered his hand and looked at me. “Personally, I’d marry you right this moment if I could.”

His words startled me. *What kind of face am I making right now?* I recalled what Kaori had said about Kohinata: *“But when he actually asks me out, I feel troubled. I admire him, but it doesn’t feel like love.”* It was similar to that. When Holmes said he wanted to marry me right this moment, I felt troubled and uncertain.

He looked away and chuckled. “I’m just kidding.”

“Huh?” I asked, bewildered.

“I’m still in training and you’re still a student,” he continued right away. “Like you said, it’s still too early.”

“Yeah, I’m not ready yet.” I nodded, feeling a little relieved. I looked up and saw him drinking his wine.

Holmes must’ve seen my expression and instantly dropped the subject. He looks indifferent, but his feelings might be hurt.

“I think it’s too early, but it makes me really happy to hear that from the person I love,” I added. It was the truth. Unlike Kaori, I knew I was in love with Holmes.

“Thank you,” he murmured softly. He smiled happily, but he also looked like he was about to cry.

Oh no, I really did hurt his feelings. I felt the urge to hug him tightly and pat his head. But if I did that, our meal would probably be cut short. I held back and took a sip of my wine.

“That aside, you’re finally leaving for Shanghai tomorrow, huh?”

“Yes.” Holmes smiled. “I’m looking forward to the exhibition very much.”

“It’s amazing that Yilin’s father can gather treasures from all over the world.”

“Indeed. What’s really amazing is that despite having so much wealth, he isn’t buying up art from all over the world like Japan did during the bubble period. He’s only borrowing them for the exhibition.”

“Yeah.” I gave a strained smile. “Japanese people had a lot of money to spend during the bubble period. I heard they were criticized by the rest of the world for buying up all that wonderful art.”

“That’s right.” Holmes nodded and explained the situation at the time.

A Japanese insurance company had bought one of Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* paintings at an auction for 5.8 billion yen, while a Japanese businessman had bought Renoir’s *Bal du Moulin de la Galette* for 11.9 billion. When the bubble burst, many of these artworks were put up for auction again and sent overseas. Ultimately, Japan had spent a lot of money just to temporarily keep works of art in the country.

“It reminds me of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” I said, slumping my shoulders.

“It wasn’t all bad, though. Bringing wonderful works of art into the country, even temporarily, got Japanese people as a whole more interested in art.”

“That might be true.” I nodded. The exhibition in Shanghai was also going to be a hot topic in China that could garner interests. It really was a great project, and it was incredible that Holmes had been invited to be an appraiser for it.

I fell silent.

“Is something the matter?” he asked, peering into my face.

“I was thinking about how amazing it is that you were invited to be an appraiser for such a wonderful project. I feel a bit sad because the distance

between us is increasing.”

Holmes blinked. “What are you talking about?” He laughed.

I’m serious, I muttered in my heart as I looked up at the night sky. “I’m going to work hard too, so that I can get even a little bit closer to you,” I whispered, steeling my resolve as I gazed at the shining moon.

Holmes smiled softly. “I’ll have to work even harder, then.”

“Huh?”

“So that you’ll always be thinking that way.”

“But then I’ll never catch up to you!”

Holmes laughed cheerfully.

My love for him, the vague fear and impatience that I might get left behind, and most of all, an inexplicable smoldering *something* in my heart—the combination of these feelings left me with a slightly bitter taste in my mouth. At this point, I had to admit it: I envied the person I loved because of his talent.

I looked down at my wine glass, feeling bittersweet. On that gentle night, the beautiful autumn moon shrouded my complicated thoughts in its light.

Main Story: Skyscraper Temptations

“I’m going to test you now. If I’m not pleased with what I see, you’ll be kicked out right away, so proceed with caution.”

Renowned curator Sally Barrymore observed the “budding curators” gathered in front of her with a critical eye. The air was tense under her gaze, and I could tell that everyone else was holding their breath just like I was. Over by the wall, Keiko Fujiwara and the rest of Sally’s assistant curators—the ones who had brought us here—were smiling wryly. They knew we had come here expecting easygoing museum tours with Sally and discussions at her salon.

I looked up timidly, wondering what the test would entail. Behind Sally was a large window, through which I could see one of New York’s most iconic landmarks, the Empire State Building. It was as if the city itself were watching us. Perhaps it was amused to see us so stiff and nervous.

I was giddy when I arrived in New York, but I should change that mindset, I thought, straightening my back. Then again, I don’t want to forget the excitement and awe either.

I thought back on the events leading up to this moment. The story began yesterday.

[1] To New York

1

My flight to New York was to depart at 10:30 a.m. from Haneda Airport. When I arrived at the international terminal, I sat on a bench near the escalators on the third floor and waited for Yoshie. It was about twenty minutes before our planned meeting time.

I took out my phone and messaged Holmes: *"I took the 6 a.m. shinkansen this morning and got to Haneda. I'm waiting for Yoshie now."*

I immediately got a call from him. I wasn't expecting that to happen, so I panicked as I pressed the answer button.

"Good morning, Holmes. You surprised me."

"Good morning. Sorry, I really wanted to hear your voice before you left," he said in a slightly apologetic tone.

I imagined his face and smiled. "It's okay. I wanted to hear your voice too, so I'm glad."

"Aoi..."

"Oh, right. Are you having fun in Shanghai?"

"Yes. The food is delicious and the city is beautiful and fascinating."

"It's beautiful?"

"Yes, Komatsu and Ensho were surprised by how clean it is."

That was surprising to me too. I had the impression of it being a messy city.

"Have you started your appraisal work yet?" I asked.

"It begins this afternoon."

"I hope it goes well."

“Thank you.”

“And take care.”

“Yes, you take care too, Aoi. If anything happens, please call me and hang up after one ring to avoid fees. I promise I’ll call you back. Don’t worry about the time difference,” Holmes insisted.

My face relaxed into a smile. He must’ve been worried because New York had an image of being unsafe. “Okay, I will.” As soon as I said that, I saw Yoshie coming up the escalator. “Oh, Yoshie’s here, so I should go.”

“Yes, please give my regards to Yoshie too.”

“Okay.” I ended the call.

“Morning, Aoi. Did you wait long?” asked Yoshie.

“Oh, no.”

I looked up and was startled to see Rikyu right behind her. He was grinning and wearing a cap that nearly covered his eyes, a leather jacket over a T-shirt, and jeans. It was a rather active-looking style, but his appearance was as beautiful as ever, making it easy to mistake him for a pretty tomboy. The fact that his slightly long hair was tied in a ponytail probably contributed to that.

“It’s not fair that mom gets her own trip to New York, so I decided to go too,” he said.

“You’re coming with us?” I squeaked.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be doing my own thing,” he quickly added before I could express my concerns.

If even Rikyu is leaving Kyoto, the manager will be the only one left to watch Kura. Will he be all right?

Rikyu pouted as if he’d guessed what I was thinking. “Kura will be fine, by the way. The owner’s going to watch the store for once.”

“Huh? Really?” I tried to visualize the owner standing at the counter. *He doesn’t even come to the store all that often.* “I can’t really imagine it.”

“Oh dear.” Yoshie laughed. “Aoi, before Kiyotaka graduated from high school,

Seiji was at the store almost every day, taking turns with Takeshi.” Takeshi was the manager’s name.

“Wait, really?”

“Seiji was relieved when Kiyotaka started university. He left the store, wanting to focus solely on the appraisal business.”

“Oh...”

“I was complaining that I wanted to go to New York but couldn’t because someone has to watch the store,” said Rikyu. “The owner was there, and he said, ‘I can do it, so don’t worry and just go. Watching the store’s about all I can do now.’”

“The owner said that watching the store was all he could do?” I couldn’t believe it. *Did something happen like Holmes said?*

“There was a bit of drama, but you don’t have to worry about it,” Yoshie said nonchalantly. “More importantly, Rikyu’s going to New York to see his girlfriend.”

“Huh?” My eyes widened. I looked at Rikyu. “You have a girlfriend?” I squeaked in surprise.

“No.” Rikyu shook his head. “She’s not my girlfriend. She’s a childhood friend.”

“But when you were in kindergarten, you promised you’d get married.” Yoshie giggled lightheartedly.

Rikyu didn’t seem annoyed or upset by that remark. He ignored it and continued, “Her name’s Haruka Ichinose, and she’s in New York right now. I figure I should at least pay her a visit while I’m there.” Judging by how indifferently he spoke, she probably really was just a childhood friend. “Anyway, let’s go check in. We don’t have that much time, you know?” he said, exasperated.

“Oh, that’s right.” Yoshie grabbed the handle of her suitcase and followed Rikyu, who had already started walking away.

We headed to the check-in counter.

“Ahh, I wanna be in business class. It’s not fair that mom gets to be there by herself. I said I wanted it too,” complained Rikyu, who had the economy seat next to mine. Yoshie had used her accumulated miles to upgrade to business class.

“You didn’t ask her for a business seat?”

“Of course I did. But she just said, ‘You can fly business class when you earn enough money for it.’ I had no chance.” He slumped his shoulders.

“That sounds like her, all right.” I giggled.

It was finally time for economy class to start boarding. Rikyu and I stood up.

“Aoi, it’s gonna be ten in the morning when we get there, so you should try to sleep as much as possible.”

It would be about 11:30 p.m. here in Japan, which was 10:30 a.m. in New York. Getting sleep on the flight would be important. It was basically like taking an overnight bus.

“Yeah.” I nodded, leaned back in my seat, and closed my eyes. *Let’s get started on that now.*

However, a thirteen-hour flight was no easy task. I had thought I’d slept for quite a while, but when I checked, only a few hours had passed. We were still over the Pacific Ocean.

Economy class really is cramped. It might be okay if it’s only for a few hours, but you can’t help but feel uncomfortable when the flight is over ten hours long. I can understand why Yoshie used the miles she saved up on an upgrade to business class.

That said, at least you could watch relatively new movies on the plane. I took the opportunity to watch two, but there was still time left. I looked next to me and saw that Rikyu had just finished watching a movie too.

“Hey, what’s your childhood friend like? I mean Haruka Ichinose,” I asked in a quiet voice.

“Hmm.” Rikyu tilted his head. “She has a small build, and since she’s always been in the track and field club, she’s thin and tanned. She also had really short hair, so people often mistook her for a boy.”

I hummed. “Did she go to New York to study?”

“Not really. She’s from a family of traditional craftsmen, and it turned out that they were gonna open a store in New York right when she graduated from high school, so she went with them. But she’s thinking of coming back to Japan after she learns the language.”

“Traditional craftsmen? What do they make?”

“Japanese umbrellas,” Rikyu said with a small yawn.

I hummed again. *I hear that traditional Japanese culture has become accepted in foreign countries. I guess that includes umbrellas. But what kind of people would use Japanese umbrellas? Maybe they’re being used as art pieces?*

“Hey, Rikyu, are those Japanese umbrellas—” I looked next to me and saw that Rikyu had put his eye mask on and gone to sleep with his arms crossed. I giggled and fixed his lap blanket, which had slid down to his feet.

Since I still had time to kill, I opened the in-flight magazine. I noticed the word “curator” in the table of contents under the article titled “These Japanese People Play an Active Role in the World” and flipped to that page. There was a picture of a gray-haired elderly man with light-colored sunglasses.

“Yohei Shinohara is an art curator currently based in New York. Due to his father’s work, he grew up in Los Angeles. His career began at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and after his stint there, he worked as an assistant to Thomas Hopkins, an influential figure in the art industry. He then became a freelance curator, and now he travels all over the globe for his work. Last year, he collaborated with curators from around the world to organize a hugely successful contemporary art exhibition in Singapore.”

The article continued with a quote by Shinohara.

“Vermeer, Picasso, Van Gogh—there are great painters of the past whose names are known to all, and for good reason. However, it is the painters of the future whose works and new perspectives I wish to pour my efforts into showing

the world. There are also many young curators who don't get the opportunity to shine. I was able to work at MoMA due to a series of good fortunes. There are many people who aren't so fortunate, and I would like to give them a chance and help them develop their talents.'"

I was touched as I read the article. *I didn't know about this fellow, even though he's Japanese.* I did recognize the name of the person he was an assistant to, though. Holmes had trained under Thomas Hopkin for about two months. *Will Holmes also be working around the world as an appraiser one day? Oh, he was just invited to Shanghai as one! It's already happening.*

I closed the magazine and looked at the screen in front of me, wondering if we were already above America. We were still over the ocean.

When you look at a map, New York seems far away, but now I realize just how far it is. In the past, it would've been very difficult for people to go there. Thinking about it that way, maybe this flight isn't so long after all. Airplanes cut across the sky, even higher than the clouds, connecting cities to one another.

I closed my eyes, feeling a surge of gratitude for the aircraft that was carrying me.

2

And so, roughly thirteen hours after takeoff, the plane landed safely at John F. Kennedy International Airport. While waiting in line at immigration, I absentmindedly gazed at the sunlight shining brightly through the window. I turned on my phone, which had already switched to New York time. It was almost 11 a.m.

"Were you able to sleep, Aoi?" Yoshie asked with a cheerful smile, peering into my face.

"Yes, for a total of about five hours. You seem really energetic."

"Yes, outside of mealtime, I slept like a log."

Rikyu yawned. "Business class really has it good, huh?"

"Well, for people who can't sleep on planes, even first class won't do. I'm the

type of person who can. Did you get any sleep, Rikyu?"

"A bit."

The immigration counter had well-built American men with stern expressions and dark blue uniforms on standby. After almost an hour, it was finally our turn. I watched Yoshie and Rikyu go up to the counter. They each smiled, raised a hand, and said hi in English as they showed their passports, seemingly used to the process.

I nervously finished my checks and went through the gate. At last, I was in America. This was New York. I wasn't going to be meeting Keiko Fujiwara or Sally Barrymore until tomorrow, so I didn't have any plans for today.

"Even if you're sleepy now, you should try your best to stay awake until night," Yoshie warned me. "And then you'll ideally want to sleep early to tune yourself."

"To prevent jet lag, right?" I nodded.

"Now then, let's walk around New York today. Oh right. What will you be doing, Rikyu?" She turned around to look at her son, who was taking a selfie with his phone. "What, doing your social media stuff again?"

"Yeah," replied Rikyu. He had recently made a social media account focused on taking photos. Although he took selfies, he didn't show his entire face in them. They only had about a third of his face, including one eye. He would post pictures of himself making a peace sign in front of some kind of scenery as well as building blueprints he'd drawn. Since he didn't reveal his real name or gender, the glimpses of his face had people speculating about whether he was a girl or a boy. He was gaining a lot of followers, but he didn't follow anyone back or reply to comments. "Anyway, I was gonna drop my luggage off at the hotel and then visit Haruka."

"I want to see Haruka too...but would I be interrupting anything?" Yoshie said teasingly.

Rikyu seemed completely unfazed. "Not really. I think she'd want to see you and Aoi too."

"Me?" I pointed at myself. "Why?"

“Yeah. She’s Kiyo’s fan, so she’s been wanting to meet you for a long time.”

“Huh?” I gaped.

Rikyu laughed mischievously. “She was all, ‘Kiyo’s so perfect; if he’s crazy about Aoi then she must be a wonderful woman. I’d love to meet her.’”

“What?” I squeaked. “H-How did you reply to that?”

“I said, ‘You’ll know when you see her.’”

“Oh...” I felt like his phrasing only made things harder for me.

“Sounds like a plan,” said Yoshie. “Let’s all go see Haruka.” She cheerfully clapped her hands together and looked at me. “Oh, right. Haruka’s family has been making Japanese umbrellas for generations.”

“I know. Rikyu told me about it on the plane. It’s amazing that they can open a store in New York.”

“Indeed.”

Yoshie explained to me that Haruka’s family business was headquartered in Gion. In recent years, they had opened branch stores in Arashiyama and Uji. New York was their first overseas venture, and the store here had been open for a year and a half now.

“Will you come with us, Aoi?” she asked.

“Yes, I’d like to.” Meeting Haruka was daunting because of how the bar had been raised, but I wanted to see what a store specializing in Japanese umbrellas would be like in New York.

“Let’s check in at the hotel first.”

As we walked, Yoshie mentioned that the hotel we were staying at tonight was close to Grand Central Station.

“Huh, I got a message,” said Rikyu, taking out his phone. He looked at the screen and exclaimed, “Whaaat?!”

“Huh? What happened, Rikyu?” I asked.

“Oh, uh, nothing.” He put his hand on his head and sighed reluctantly. “Aoi, mom, New York is a dangerous city, so stay close to me.” He suddenly had a

sharp look in his eyes.

Yoshie burst out laughing. “Oh, Rikyu. New York isn’t as dangerous as it used to be, you know?”

“I know, but this isn’t Japan,” Rikyu continued with a grim expression.

Yoshie and I looked at each other and tilted our heads, wondering what had gotten into him.

I would later learn that the message had come from Holmes, who was asking Rikyu to be my bodyguard. But at the time, I couldn’t have known.

3

Since we’d come all the way to New York, Yoshie suggested taking the subway instead of a taxi, which I agreed to. We headed for the station just outside the airport.

“Isn’t the subway dangerous? Actually, it might be easier for the taxi to get into an accident, so maybe the subway is better?” Rikyu mumbled as he walked behind us.

“I come to New York quite often, but I always take a taxi from the airport,” said Yoshie.

We left and took the AirTrain—a train that connected the various terminals, which spanned a large area—to the subway.

Yoshie seemed to know what she was doing, but when we got to the platform, she blinked in confusion at the sign that said, “To Jamaica.”

“Jamaica? That’s the country famous for its bobsledding team, right?” she asked.

“Huh?” I replied. “No, bobsledding is a sport played in northern regions, isn’t it?”

“Oh dear, Aoi. You don’t know that Jamaica competed in bobsledding at the Winter Olympics?”

“What? They did?”

“You’re kidding, right? It’s a really famous story. It was even made into a film called *Cool Runnings*.”

“I had no idea.”

“Oh gosh, is this what people mean by ‘the generation gap’? I’m so shocked.”

Behind Yoshie, Rikyu crossed his arms in exasperation and said, “Anyway, Jamaica is the name of a station. We’re gonna transfer to the E train and go to Manhattan.”

“Oh, so that’s what it is,” said Yoshie, unfazed.

“You seem to know a lot, Rikyu,” I said. “Do you come here a lot?”

“No, this is my first time in New York too. I just looked at the subway map in a guidebook; that’s all.”

As we talked, the train arrived. Yoshie and I got on right away, but Rikyu cautiously looked around before following us in. The AirTrain reached Jamaica Station in a flash. There, we transferred to the subway.

On the platform, Rikyu was again looking around warily.

“What’s wrong, Rikyu?” I asked.

“Nothing. Don’t mind me.”

A silver train pulled up and we boarded it. I’d expected the New York subway to be scary and full of graffiti, but it actually felt quite clean. It was very empty, so we sat down without hesitation.

“I wasn’t expecting it to be so clean,” I murmured.

“That’s right,” Yoshie replied with a firm nod. “It’s said that in the eighties, even men were afraid to ride the subway alone. But thanks to reforms, it’s clean and safe now.”

“I see.” I looked around the train car again and saw parents with their children and young girls who appeared to be students. They were chatting happily.

Come to think of it, Holmes said Shanghai was very clean too. I was really surprised when I heard that. My impressions of these places and biases against

them might've been naturally inherited from my parents' generation. I guess there are a lot of things you can't understand until you see them in person. Confirming things and updating your information is an essential part of life.

I nodded to myself and took my translating device out of my bag, then put the wireless earphone in my ear and turned on the device. Now, languages spoken by other people would be translated to Japanese in my ear, and when I spoke, the device would translate my words into the selected language. Conversations would have delays, but the important thing was that I would be able to communicate with others.

We really live in an amazing time. In the future, people might not need to learn foreign languages as long as they have a translating device.

4

The subway ride took about an hour. After getting off the train, we went through the ticket gates with our large suitcases. The New York subway used turnstiles. I swiped my MetroCard (which I had purchased at the ticketing area) through the reader and proceeded forward, the bar turning with a *clunk* as I walked through.

Yoshie struggled to get the bar to turn. She fumbled frantically through the ticket gate like a prisoner trying to escape from jail.

“Argh, whenever I take a train overseas, I realize how great Japan’s ticket gates are,” she said, grimacing.

“You’re the one who suggested taking the subway,” Rikyu replied, exasperated. He passed through the gate without trouble.

“Well, we’re finally in Manhattan. That took a long time.”

Yoshie seemed to have found the one-hour trip from the airport long, but for me, the time had flown by. The subway went above ground at times, and I had fun just looking at the scenery outside.

After reaching the top of the stairs, I looked up and was rendered speechless by the sight before me. Rows of huge buildings towered over us as if to block our way. Some of them had modern designs, while many others had a historic,

classical look. Japan had buildings that were just as tall—and I wasn't so unaccustomed to cities that I would be surprised by skyscrapers—but for some reason, the ones in New York felt particularly huge. Perhaps it was because each building was draped in the tremendous energy given off by the city. Cars coming and going, young people gliding by on their bikes, hot dog stands—I had seen this very scene in films and foreign TV shows before, so I felt as if I had been sucked into the world within the screen. It was a strange sensation. I was so overwhelmed by the streets of Manhattan that I almost forgot to breathe.

“Dang, New York is amazing,” Rikyu croaked, seeming to feel the same.

“Yeah.” I gulped. “It really is...”

As we stood there in awe, a portly African-American woman stopped as she was passing by. Through my translating device, I heard her ask, “Oh? Are you lost? Do you need help?”

“Thank you; we're fine,” Yoshie replied with a smile. “We just arrived in Manhattan, so we were admiring the scenery.”

“Oh, how nice. Are you Japanese?”

“Yes,” we said, nodding.

The woman giggled. “Japan is a great place. I love it. Enjoy New York!”

“Thank you,” we replied.

“You're welcome!” She waved as she left.

We waved back. As I watched her walk away, a warm feeling welled up in my chest. It felt like the city of New York had welcomed us. Even though it was a huge metropolis, the people passing by seemed very kind and relaxed.

“Oh gosh, Rikyu. I've fallen in love with New York,” I murmured.

“You're so simpleminded,” he said with a shrug. “I get it, though.” He laughed.

“All right, you two, the hotel is this way,” Yoshie said as she set off.

“Oh, okay.” I snapped back to attention and followed her. As I walked, I gazed at the urban scenery unfolding before me, my heart pounding in excitement for what was to come.

We left our luggage in the lobby of the Kitano Hotel New York and headed straight to SoHo.

5

“SoHo” was an abbreviation of “South of Houston.” As its name suggested, it was the neighborhood south of Houston Street in Downtown Manhattan. I had the impression of it being a fashionable place where young artists gathered.

At Yoshie’s behest, we went to SoHo by taxi. When I got out of the cab, I caught sight of many historical English-style buildings. They had been renovated into luxury boutiques, specialty stores, and restaurants, giving the neighborhood a unique charm that mixed modern and retro.

Rikyu’s eyes lit up as he pointed his digital camera at the historical buildings. “This is SoHo’s cast iron! I’ve always wanted to see it in person,” he said excitedly.

“Cast iron? Where?” I tilted my head.

“Cast iron is a style of architecture that came over from England in the mid-nineteenth century. SoHo has a lot of it.”

“Oh, that’s what it’s called?” I nodded as I looked up at the culture-rich buildings.

“New York hardly ever has earthquakes, so these kinds of old buildings are still standing. There are also designated districts for preserving historical buildings,” Rikyu explained as he happily took photos.

“No wonder you want to be an architect. You really love buildings,” I said earnestly.

“I guess.” He shrugged, seeming slightly embarrassed.

As I walked, I observed the buildings and noticed an udon shop called Omen.

“This udon shop has its flagship store near Ginkaku-ji Temple,” Yoshie explained.

The Japanese umbrella store run by the father of Haruka Ichinose, Rikyu’s

childhood friend, was located near the udon shop. It had a sign saying “WAGASA” with the words “Japanese umbrella” underneath it. The entrance was a modern Japanese-style lattice sliding door, which had been left open.

We stepped inside and were greeted by beautiful Japanese umbrellas in a variety of colors, hanging on the wall in an opened state. In the back of the store, there was a workspace where a man in his fifties was putting together an umbrella frame. He was wearing traditional Japanese work clothes and had a serious expression. He was probably the owner of the store, Haruka’s father.

“Hey, how’s it going?” asked Rikyu.

The store owner looked up and smiled happily. “Hey, Rikyu and Yoshie. Thanks for coming all this way.” Immediately after his cheerful greeting, he turned around and yelled in the direction of the stairs, “Hey, Haruka! Rikyu’s here!” From his accent, I could tell that despite being an umbrella craftsman from Kyoto, he’d been born in Kanto, not Kansai. Perhaps he had moved to Kyoto as an adult.

“Coming!” came an energetic response, followed by the sound of forceful—and fast—footsteps hurrying down the stairs. Finally, there was the loud thud of someone slipping and falling on their rear.

“Good grief.” The store owner placed a hand on his forehead.

“Haruka hasn’t changed, huh?” said Rikyu, amused.

“R-Rikyu!” A tanned girl with short hair emerged from behind the curtain. She was cute with large, bright eyes. She didn’t look like a boy at all.

“Huh?” Rikyu’s eyes widened the moment he saw her.

“Ahhh, don’t say it!” she exclaimed, holding up her hand. “I know I’ve gained weight. What do you expect? I quit track and field!” she explained rapidly, trying to preempt whatever Rikyu was about to say.

“Well, I don’t think you gained *that* much weight.”

“So I *did* gain weight.” She pouted before regaining her composure and smiling cheerfully. “Anyway, thanks for coming, Rikyu and Mama Yoshie.”

“It’s been such a long time,” said Yoshie. “You seem to be doing well.”

“And you’re as pretty as ever, Mama Yoshie.” Haruka grinned. Then she looked at me and froze. “Um, who’s this?”

“Oh, this is the girlfriend I told you about,” said Rikyu. “You said you wanted to meet her, right?”

“Huh?” Her eyes widened. She looked back and forth between me and Rikyu several times. “O-Oh!” She nodded firmly and clapped her hands together. “I-I see. You got a girlfriend, Rikyu. And you brought her here. Yeah, I did say that if you ever got a girlfriend, I’d want to meet her. Oh, so that’s why you came all the way here...”

Despite seeming cheerful at first glance, it was clear that she’d misunderstood Rikyu’s words and was in a state of shock. I hurriedly tried to correct her.

“Um, Haruka,” I began, holding out my hand.

“Sorry! I know you came a long way, but something urgent came up that I have to deal with today. Well then, have fun in New York!” she prattled before dashing out of the store.

“H-Hey, Haruka!” shouted the store owner. “Haven’t you been looking forward to Rikyu’s visit? What’s with this urgent business?” His questions went unanswered, as Haruka was already out of sight.

“Jeez, she’s always like that.” Rikyu gave an exasperated shrug.

The store owner placed a hand on his head, looking apologetic. “Sorry, you came all this way.”

“Nah, it’s not her fault something urgent came up,” Rikyu replied indifferently.

I frowned at him. *Yeah, it’s your fault for not understanding a girl’s heart.*

“By the way, is Kiyotaka not with you?” the store owner asked, craning his neck as if looking for Holmes.

“No, Kiyo’s not here. He’s in Shanghai for work.”

“I see he’s still flying all over the place.” The store owner slumped his shoulders, seeming slightly disappointed.

“Huh? Did you wanna see Kiyo?”

“Well, he always gives me the right advice. When we were opening a new store in Uji, he made a lot of suggestions that were right on the mark. It helped me a lot, so I wanted him to take a look at our New York store as well,” he said weakly, looking around the space.

The Japanese umbrellas on display were very beautiful. The atmosphere was no different from what you’d see at a specialty umbrella store in a Kyoto tourist spot. It seemed like it would attract foreigners...and yet there wasn’t a single customer.

Yoshie noticed that we were the only ones in the store and placed a hand on her cheek. “Oh dear, do Japanese umbrellas not resonate with New Yorkers?”

“It’s not that,” said the store owner. “We did get customers at first because of the uniqueness of our products. But now, it’s like this most of the time. Even people who like Japanese things aren’t going to repeatedly buy umbrellas.”

“Oh...” Rikyu gave a rueful smile.

“I married into the family from Kanto, you know? I became an umbrella craftsman’s apprentice, married his daughter, and inherited the business. I’m trying to make wonderful products, but my teacher—my father-in-law—never acknowledges me. Even though I opened more stores and increased revenue, he won’t so much as look at me. It irritated me for so long that before I knew it, I opened a store all the way out here. This place is dead, though, so it might be time to close up shop and go back home,” he said sadly, glancing around the store again.

If only Holmes had come today. The store owner must’ve wanted to ask him for advice. I didn’t know much about Japanese umbrellas, but the ones here all looked elegant and beautiful to me.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help but complain,” he said, scratching his head in embarrassment.

Rikyu shook his head. “It’s fine. Kiyo comes to New York pretty often, so I’ll tell him to stop by here next time.”

“Thanks.” The store owner smiled. “I really am sorry about Haruka, though.

She was so excited up until yesterday.”

“Don’t worry about it, uncle. We’ll be around for a while.”

“Yes, we can come back another time,” added Yoshie.

“Yeah, please do.”

We bowed and excused ourselves from the store.

Once we were outside, Rikyu took out his phone, saying, “I’m so hungry.”

“Hey, Rikyu, was that okay?” I whispered.

“What?” He turned to me, expression unchanged.

“Haruka got the wrong idea.”

“It doesn’t matter. She’s a hassle to deal with, so just leave her alone,” he said indifferently, folding his hands behind his head.

“A hassle...”

Rikyu ignored my frown and turned to Yoshie. “Hey, mom, can we get something to eat? I just realized that it’s already evening but we haven’t even had lunch. The fatigue, hunger, and lack of sleep are making my head all fuzzy.”

“You’re right.” Yoshie nodded. “What should we eat, then? Oh, can you eat oysters, Aoi?”

“Ooh!” I clapped my hands together. “I love oysters.”

“Great. There’s an oyster bar I recommend. Let’s have an early dinner there and then go back to the hotel to rest.”

“An oyster bar feels very ‘New York,’ huh? I’m excited,” I replied, raising a hand to my mouth.

“Yeah, let’s do that. Whoo!” Rikyu raised both hands in the air and eagerly began walking away.

Yoshie’s recommended oyster bar was located inside Grand Central Station. It had an arched ceiling and tables covered in red and white gingham cloth. The old-fashioned interior evoked imagery of America’s good old days.

I let Yoshie and Rikyu handle the ordering. Before long, a variety of raw

oysters, fried oysters, shrimp, and French fries arrived at the table, along with a type of beer called Brooklyn Lager. The beer was served in large cups rather than mugs.

“All right, then, a toast to Manhattan.”

We clinked our cups together and took a gulp of the beer.

“Oh, this is good.” *Is it because I’m tired from all the traveling? I’ve never particularly liked the taste of beer, but this Brooklyn Lager is delicious, like it’s permeating my mind and body.*

“The oysters aren’t that big, but they have a rich flavor,” said Yoshie.

“Yeah. They aren’t as meaty as the oysters from Hokkaido or Hiroshima, but they’re flavorful and delicious.” I nodded as I savored the raw oysters.

Yoshie had already finished her beer and was asking for a refill.

“Don’t collapse, mom,” Rikyu said with a cold shrug.

“I’ll be fine.” Yoshie smiled. “When that happens, I’ll have my reliable son carry me.”

“No way. I’m strong, but not like that. You’ll have to try your best on your own.”

My face relaxed into a smile as I listened to the charming conversation between mother and son. *They must’ve always gotten along like this.*

After our meal at the oyster bar, we returned to the Kitano Hotel. As one could surmise from the name, this chic hotel was run by a Japanese company. Our luggage had already been delivered to our rooms, so we walked straight through the elegant lobby to the elevators. Yoshie and I were sharing a room, while Rikyu was in the room next door.

Right before we entered our rooms, Rikyu said, “Well then, good night, mom and Aoi. Don’t go outside the hotel on your own, all right? If you wanna go out, make sure to tell me. Especially you, Aoi. Don’t do anything on your own. If you wanna go for a morning walk, call me.”

“Yes, yes, again with the sudden worrying, I see. Good night,” said Yoshie.

“Okay, I will,” I told Rikyu. “Good night.” I waved to him and went into my room with Yoshie.

The decor was very chic and sophisticated. There were two semi-double beds, a sofa, a desk, and a TV. Everything was big and the room was spacious.

“Wow...” What surprised me the most was the view of Manhattan’s skyscrapers. I could see the lit-up Empire State Building. “It really feels like I’m in a movie.”

As I gazed out the window, nearly pressed to the glass, Yoshie came up to me with an amused smile. “I know; I felt the same way when I first visited New York seven years ago. How could I not? It was the same world I’d seen in movies and TV shows ever since I was young, but in real life.”

“Yeah.” I nodded, not looking away from the window.

“And it made me think, ‘If I’d come here when I was a student, I would’ve done everything I could have to be able to live here.’”

I turned around in surprise. Yoshie smiled mischievously and gently touched the pane.

“That’s how awed and fascinated I was by this city.”

I recalled the feeling I’d had when we’d exited the subway station onto the streets of New York. “I think I know what you mean,” I murmured.

“Oh?” Her eyes lit up. “Are you going to study abroad in New York?”

The words “study abroad” made my heart leap.

“Oh, but Kiyotaka will miss you.”

“Yeah.” *It would be different from the current situation where we’re only separated for a short period of time. Holmes would surely be sad if I studied abroad for real. He might even gently oppose it.*

“Well, even if he’s lonely, you don’t have to worry about him.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at how nonchalantly she said that. “Studying in New York isn’t a realistic plan, though.”

“Is that so? If Sally takes a liking to you, it might be possible.”

I suddenly felt tense at the mention of that name. “Um, what kind of person is Sally Barrymore? I tried doing some online research, but...” I had read up on the curator’s background and interviews, but I wanted to hear Yoshie’s opinion since she’d actually met her.

“I’ve met her before, but all we did was exchange greetings at a party, so I’m not sure. Let me think...” Yoshie stroked her chin. “I think she’s in her fifties now? She’s a pretty and stylish woman with short blonde hair. Very dignified. I’ve also heard rumors that she’s very strict. Well, you’ll find out tomorrow.” She patted me on the back.

“Yeah.” I gave a small nod.

“Anyway, I’m exhausted. I’ll take a bath first, all right?”

“Go ahead.” I looked back outside the window. My face reflected in the glass was slightly swollen. It was to be expected; though I had slept a bit on the plane, I had been awake for nearly a whole day since leaving Japan. But since I’d been excited the whole time, I didn’t feel tired. “I need to get some proper sleep and restore my strength.”

I wondered what tomorrow would have in store. *What is Sally going to have us do?*

Meanwhile...

“Oh, Kiyo? Yeah, we’re back at the hotel. It did feel like we were being watched by someone. I didn’t sense any dangerous intent, though, and they didn’t follow us to SoHo. So it doesn’t seem like they’re sticking around twenty-four seven. Huh? You decided to accept his demands? I guess that explains the lack of dangerous intent, then. Anyway, they’re watching us so that they can take pictures to send to you. I know; I’m not gonna let down my guard, and I’m not gonna let Aoi notice what’s up. Yeah, I’ll take care of things over here.”

I was completely oblivious to the serious conversation concerning my safety that Rikyu was having with Holmes in the room next door.

And so, our eventful first day in New York came to a close.

[2] Keiko Fujiwara's Opinion and Sally's Test

1

Sally Barrymore's office was located in a building on the north side of Times Square. That day, all of the invited budding curators would be gathering in one place, so she had rented a conference room on the top floor and her assistants were hard at work making preparations. Keiko Fujiwara and the other assistants had brought out long tables and folding chairs. They had also set up an armchair in front of the windows for Sally to sit on.

"Hey, so what's the final count on the budding curators who are coming?" asked Keiko.

"Let me see," replied a slim African-American woman in an elegant suit. She picked up the documents that had been left on the table. "Fourteen. They're all students."

"Fourteen... I wasn't sure how it was going to turn out at first, but that's quite a lot," Keiko murmured.

"It really is," said a Caucasian woman with blonde hair neatly tied up. She laughed and continued, "Even if we already know budding female curators, it's hard to invite them here." She shrugged.

"Yeah." Everyone smiled ruefully.

"When they get here, Sally's just going to say, 'None of you have any promise' and send them home."

"That's very likely."

"She really is fickle..."

"One of my juniors is coming. I'm fond of her, so I'm worried that this is going to traumatize her."

"Yeah, it weighs on the conscience."

“But at least Sally’s covering the travel expenses, so it’s a free trip.”

Keiko said nothing as she listened to the assistants’ conversation. It seemed that everyone else had invited juniors they wanted to have as their own assistants when they eventually went independent. *My situation is different in that respect*, she thought, her face relaxing into a smile.

“Oh? What’re you grinning about, Keiko?” asked the woman next to her.

Keiko hurriedly put on a straight face. “I’m not grinning. But in my case, I invited a girl I barely know, so I don’t feel bad about it.”

An image of Aoi Mashiro passed through her mind. The girl had been accompanying Kiyotaka Yagashira, a young man whose talent she recognized. *Was she in high school back then? I knew immediately that she was special to Kiyotaka. I remember clearly how disappointed and annoyed I was when I saw her childishness and realized that Kiyotaka was a lolicon. I won’t feel any remorse at all when Sally kicks her out.*

“Oh dear. Is it okay to invite someone like that?”

“If you invite someone too inept, you’re the one who’s going to be scolded.”

“You have a point.” Keiko crossed her arms. “But she *is* competent, so it’ll be fine.” She thought back to when Aoi had correctly guessed the potters who had made the Raku tea bowls.

“Oh, right. I said to Sally the other day, ‘The students are coming here soon, huh?’ and she replied, ‘Oh, so they are.’ Even though it was her idea in the first place, I bet she half-forgot about it.”

Keiko snapped back to attention at the assistant’s words. “It’s to be expected. Her current project is in its final stage.”

A new building had been built on Fifth Avenue last year. An art exhibition was going to be held there for the first time, and Sally was in charge. The title was “Light and Shadow: Vermeer and Meegeren.” Vermeer was the world-famous painter of *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (also known in Japan as *Girl with a Blue Turban*), and Meegeren had devoted his life to making forgeries of his work. Meegeren had been gaining attention in recent years, and Sally had zeroed in on this when she’d proposed the project. She had easily won the client’s heart

with a simulation of an exhibition hall that made masterful use of light and shadow.

Naturally, Keiko and the other assistants were hard at work on the project as well. On top of that, they were busy dealing with unexpected problems that had come up with other requests. Frankly, they didn't have time to invite students over for a study session. But they weren't about to complain. Sally surely had her reasons. Keiko had many thoughts about her ways, but she greatly admired her talent.

"Speaking of the Vermeer project, Sally was really annoyed that she might not be able to get all of the pieces for the exhibit," said one of the assistants.

"Yeah, since MoMA's being renovated, she planned it out knowing she'd be able to get Vermeer works that aren't normally available. But there's a big exhibition happening in Shanghai too, so they might get taken there."

"She went to a party to negotiate, and that's where she ran into her old enemy who said, 'We don't need women in this world.'"

Keiko hummed as she listened to her colleagues' conversation. "It doesn't make sense to me. As far as I know, he isn't the kind of person who would discriminate against women. He actually struck me as a chivalrous man."

"But the chief witnessed him saying it to her. Sally was so mad that she ran out of the party hall, so I doubt she's lying."

"I wouldn't be so sure. She might be trying to ruin his reputation, you know?"

"No, neither Sally nor the chief revealed his name to anyone else, so it doesn't seem like a personal attack."

As they were talking, Keiko's phone rang in her pocket. It was a call from the receptionist informing her that Yoshie's group had arrived in the lobby.

"Show them to the reception room," Keiko instructed. She hung up and addressed the other assistants. "Sorry, the student I invited is here a bit early, so I'm going to go get her." She sent Yoshie a message saying, "I'm on my way" and put her phone back in her pocket.

"She came this early? Japanese people really are diligent."

Keiko smiled at her impressed colleagues and left the conference room.

Yoshie's group had arrived one hour ahead of Sally's scheduled meeting time. It was because Keiko had told them to come early. This way, she could use them as an excuse to skip out on the meeting preparations.

"I'm glad I had them come early," she muttered. Even if Aoi was inevitably going to get kicked out, she at least wanted to avoid making Sally furious. An hour would give her some time to prepare Aoi for what was to come.

Keiko took the elevator downstairs and headed to the reception room. As she walked, she placed a hand on her forehead and thought, *All things considered, it does feel bad*. She didn't really like Aoi Mashiro. The girl herself wasn't the problem, but rather how disappointing and depressing it was that Kiyotaka's girlfriend was someone like her.

She gave a small sigh and pictured Kiyotaka in her mind. He had a handsome face, an impeccable physique, extensive knowledge, and elegant mannerisms. On top of that, he had outstanding talent and an environment that gave him a promising future. With all of that in his arsenal, he could seriously become anything he wanted to be.

Several years ago, she had wanted to get closer to him. She had invited him to her home, using her collection of rare and valuable art references as bait. The plan had worked, and Kiyotaka had come over. The art references had merely been a pretext—from there, she could deepen their relationship.

Unfortunately, it hadn't gone as she'd hoped. Kiyotaka had spent two days sitting on the sofa, so absorbed in the references that he hadn't eaten or slept. After he had read everything, he had smiled happily at her, bags under his eyes, and said, "Thank you for letting me read such valuable books. I feel very satisfied."

Keiko stopped. Remembering what had happened gave her a mild urge to stab something. It had been a clear indication from Kiyotaka that he had no intention of getting into that kind of relationship with her. She had wondered if he was just straitlaced, but that hadn't been the case at the time. She had once spotted him having a meal with a beautiful woman at a restaurant in Manhattan. The woman was a Japanese pianist working in New York, and the

two of them had seemed close. Thinking about it now, Kiyotaka probably hadn't been interested in having intimate relationships with people in the same industry as him.

According to Seiji Yagashira, Kiyotaka had sworn off serious relationships ever since having his heart broken. The renowned appraiser had even said, "He might wind up being single his whole life." But Kiyotaka had chosen Aoi Mashiro. Keiko wasn't resentful that she hadn't been chosen. But she had to question his decision. That girl was the epitome of "average." She couldn't help but think that there must be a more suitable woman for him—one who was both beautiful and intelligent. Perhaps it was similar to the feeling some people had when their favorite actor married someone who only had her youth and prettiness going for her.

That said, Aoi Mashiro did have more going for her than her youth. Keiko had sensed in her the makings of a connoisseur; otherwise, she wouldn't have invited her to meet Sally. But thinking about it now, maybe that had secretly been a hint from Kiyotaka.

Keiko frowned, feeling even more depressed. "Well, whatever." She looked up, trying to regain her composure. *Even if the girl is stupid, as long as she doesn't put Sally in a bad mood, that's good enough.*

Upon arriving at the reception room, Keiko gave a small sigh. She knocked on the door and opened it without waiting for a response. Yoshie was sitting on the sofa in the back, while two women were sitting on the one in front. One of them had long hair, and the other had shoulder-length hair tied in a ponytail.

The woman with long hair immediately stood up. She turned around, her hair fluttering in the air, and greeted Keiko with an elegant bow. "It's been a long time, Keiko. Thank you so much for inviting me to this event."

It was Aoi Mashiro.

"O-Oh, yes, Aoi." The girl's face hadn't changed, and yet Keiko hadn't recognized her for a second. Aoi's aura and mannerisms were completely different from before. "It *has* been a long time. Thank you for coming all the way to New York."

Aoi shook her head. "No, I'm very grateful for the opportunity. I didn't think I

deserved it, but I was so happy that I came anyway. I might cause trouble for you since I don't belong here, but I hope you'll bear with me." She smiled gently and bowed again.

Keiko's face naturally relaxed in response. She quickly came to her senses and crossed her arms. *Was she always such a lovely girl?*

The sudden silence made Aoi tilt her head. "Keiko?"

Keiko snapped back to attention and returned the smile. *She's a university student now. Of course she'd be different from when she was in high school. She's just a little bit more refined and mature than before. It doesn't change the fact that she's average.*

"Have a seat," said Keiko. She was about to offer to make drinks, but the three guests already had coffee cups in front of them. They must've been prepared by the staff member who'd brought them there.

"Good to see you again, Keiko," Yoshie said with a smile.

"You too, Yoshie. You're as beautiful as ever." Keiko smiled back. "Who's this?" she asked, looking at the girl sitting across from Yoshie. This one had a pretty face that gave off a cold aura.

"Long time no see, Keiko," the girl said, bowing. In contrast to her appearance, her voice was very husky.

"Huh? Have we met before?" Keiko peered at the girl's face. *I don't think I would've forgotten someone this beautiful...*

"I'm her son, Rikyu. I'm pretty sure we met at the Saito estate."

Keiko suddenly recalled the pretty boy who'd been with Aoi at the time. "Oh, that was you!" She nodded firmly. "You look very cute today, so I thought you were a girl. I'm so sorry."

Rikyu shook his head. "It's fine." He put his hands together pleadingly and said, "Keiko, I also admire the work of appraisers and curators because of Kiyo, and I'd love to observe the event. I promise I won't get in the way, and I'll make sure they don't realize I'm a man. Please let me watch." He bowed deeply.

"So that's why you're dressed like that," said Keiko, nodding but taken aback

by his insistence. Only female budding curators were invited to the event, but that didn't mean that men weren't allowed on the premises. However, since the project had come about after Sally's old enemy made a derogatory remark about women, it did have a "no men allowed" atmosphere. "Well, if you just want to watch, that's fine. We'll probably need you to be a wallflower from start to finish, though."

Rikyu placed his hand on his chest, relieved.

Keiko straightened her back and looked at Aoi, who was sitting right in front of her. "First, Aoi, let me ask you: how do you perceive Sally's job as an art curator?"

She had asked this question many times of Japanese students, and most of them had answered, "It's what we call a 'gakugei-in' in Japan." She was positive that Aoi would say the same thing. *I'll need her to correct that perception first.*

Aoi looked Keiko in the eye and said, "At first, I thought it was the same as Japan's gakugei-in. After all, when you translate 'gakugei-in' into English, it becomes 'curator.' And of course, curators in the West do similar work to gakugei-in. But I learned that the scope of their work is different."

Keiko hummed and crossed her arms. *She must be aiming to become a curator herself, whether in Japan or elsewhere. She should know at least this much, I suppose.* "That's right. Many people in Japan think that curators in Japan and the West are the same, but they actually aren't."

For example, a curator at a museum in Japan was responsible for most of the museum's tasks. It was a difficult job that required one to single-handedly do everything, whether it be planning, management, accounting, or miscellaneous tasks. Some self-deprecatingly called themselves "odd job curators" instead of art curators.

On the other hand, the work of a curator in the West had a narrower scope. They used their expertise to plan projects and produce exhibitions. The other work, including miscellaneous tasks, was left to staff members. Curators in the West were similar to film directors, and they had a different social standing than Japan's curators.

Aoi listened intently to Keiko's explanation.

“As I’m sure you know, unlike in Japan, there isn’t a professional curator certification in the West. So anyone can call themselves a curator, and there are many self-proclaimed ones out there. However, that doesn’t mean it’s easy. A curator in the West needs to have comprehensive knowledge, a wide social network, and management skills in order to produce engaging projects. It’s hard to be successful at this job.”

Aoi gulped.

“I’d say that most curators in America work at large art museums before going freelance. Sally is a perfect example of that.”

After working at a famous art museum and going freelance, a curator would travel around the world, producing exhibitions in various countries. Their projects weren’t limited to art galleries and museums.

“If a curator like me, who only worked at a small art gallery, suddenly goes freelance, they aren’t going to get any jobs. That’s why I’m working as an assistant to Sally, a famous curator, so that I can learn things and make myself better known in the industry at the same time. Connections are everything in this world.”

Aoi gave a silent nod. Next to her, Rikyu hummed and said, “Like how Kiyo accompanies the owner around the world.”

“Yes.” Keiko nodded. “Sally’s assets are her knowledge, sense, and excellent eye for appraisal. She has a lot of wealthy clients who trust her talent.”

In this world where curators were a dime a dozen, Sally had likely succeeded because she already had celebrity status from her rich father. That said, she did have underlying talent: an excellent discerning eye. And since she had talent, she worked very hard so that people wouldn’t think she was riding on her parents’ coattails. As a result, she was equally strict with other people. The moment she thought someone was useless to her, she cut them off immediately.

“Oh, right. How’s your English, Aoi?”

Aoi gave an apologetic shrug. “I can barely speak it at all. I do have a translating device, but...”

“Ah,” Keiko said with a wry smile. She had a feeling that Sally would kick Aoi out, saying that she had nothing to teach someone who couldn’t even understand her language.

“Um, is it bad to use a translator?”

“I’d say it’s better than not being able to communicate at all. Sally doesn’t like people who don’t take any precautions, so you can keep the translator on,” Keiko replied with a vague smile.

Aoi nervously nodded and put the wireless earphone in her ear. It was hidden by her hair, so you couldn’t tell it was there. The main device seemed to be in her pocket.

“It’s a bit early, but let’s head over,” said Keiko, standing up. “The other students have probably arrived.”

Aoi quickly stood up as well. Her anxious expression had disappeared, replaced by a serious look in her eyes. Keiko was mildly impressed by how quickly she switched gears instead of worrying endlessly.

2

As Keiko had predicted, the budding curators were already gathered in the conference room on the top floor. Including Aoi, there were a total of fourteen, of varying nationalities.

The students were chatting with the assistants who had invited them. In front of the windows was an armchair for Sally and a table next to it. In front of those were long tables—the kind used at cram schools. Each seat had a name tag in front of it to avoid confusion.

“It kind of feels like a classroom,” said one of the students. “Is Sally going to teach us here? Weren’t we going to have a discussion in her salon?” she asked curiously.

“We actually don’t know what the plan is either,” the assistant replied apologetically.

Aoi had been listening to their conversation through the translating device.

She looked at Keiko in surprise and asked, “You don’t know what we’re going to do?”

“That’s right. Sally told us at the last minute to arrange the conference room this way. It’s only we who were kept out of the loop, though. I’d imagine her right hand, the chief assistant, knows everything.”

“Who’s the chief assistant?” Aoi asked, looking around.

“She isn’t here right now. Sally has six assistants, including me. The chief is also her secretary, and she accompanies her wherever she goes.”

Suddenly, the door opened.

“Sally—the boss—is coming!” declared one of the assistants. The room was filled with tension. “Have the students line up in a row to greet her. We’ll line up on the other side.”

At her words, the students and assistants lined up like ladies-in-waiting welcoming their queen and turned their attention to the door. Yoshie and Rikyu stood by the wall so that they wouldn’t be in the way, their backs straight. The students, who had been smiling thus far, now looked apprehensive because of the assistants’ tense reactions.

“Good morning,” said the Caucasian woman in a pantsuit who entered the conference room. It was Sally.

“Good morning,” the assistants and students replied.

Sally was in her fifties, but she didn’t look her age. She was pretty and stylish, and apparently, when she was younger, she had been so beautiful that people thought she should’ve become an actress instead.

Sally walked with her usual long stride, brushing back her short blonde hair. She handed her hat, purse, and trench coat to an assistant. The chief assistant stood behind her, holding a suitcase.

One of the students laughed at the sight. “It’s like *The Devil Wears Prada*. Is that what you’re going for?”

The assistants froze at the remark. Half of the other students laughed along, only to immediately stiffen up when they saw Sally glaring at them as if she

were looking at trash.

“I’m afraid I’ll need those who laughed just now to leave. Children without manners don’t belong here,” Sally spat as she headed for the armchair.

The assistants turned pale. “Y-Yes, ma’am.” They took the students who had laughed out of the conference room.

“Wait, you’re kidding, right? We came all the way to New York!” came an unhappy voice from outside. Sally didn’t seem to care.

Counting Aoi, there were seven students left. All of them were frozen in place. The students who had laughed were obviously in trouble, but the assistant who had brought the one who’d made the remark was probably going to get a stern talking-to as well.

Keiko placed a hand on her chest in relief. *Thank god Aoi knows her manners.*

The remaining students stood at the seats that had their name tags and looked at Sally. The curator regarded them with a smile.

“I’m Sally Barrymore. Thank you for coming today. I had a look at the reports you submitted. They were all interesting reads,” she said with a gentle expression, as if she hadn’t just kicked out half of the students. Naturally, her audience was still nervous. “Oh, don’t be so stiff. Have a seat,” she added, sitting down in the armchair.

The students followed her lead and sat down. The chief assistant opened a cardboard box and instructed the other assistants to distribute the contents to the students. They moved quickly, handing out clipboards with printouts and pens attached to them.

What are these for? Keiko wondered as she handed them out. The printouts consisted of a series of blank spaces numbered one to four.

“I’m going to test you now. If I’m not pleased with what I see, you’ll be kicked out right away, so proceed with caution.”

Sally’s harsh words made everyone stop in their tracks.

“A report alone isn’t a sufficient measure of skill. This test will show me what level you’re at. Those who pass will be accepted as my honor students, so I

expect a corresponding amount of effort.”

All of the budding curators looked around, bewildered. They had gathered here under the impression that Sally’s lectures would be friendly and easygoing. The assistants, too, looked at each other in surprise.

“My chief assistant will explain, so listen to her.”

The chief stepped forward and cleared her throat. She was a dignified-looking woman in her late twenties with shiny chin-length red hair.

“Greetings, everyone,” she began. “I’m Sally’s chief assistant. Your first test will be to identify the works of art that I’m going to place on this table. Please examine them and write their names on the answer sheet. You’re free to stand up and have a closer look, but since they’re on loan to us, we ask that you refrain from touching them.”

The students nodded silently. All of them were aspiring art curators. They had been shaken at first, but now, they saw this as an opportunity.

“Let’s begin. Here is the first piece.”

The first item was a ceramic plate with a colorful portrayal of the Judgment of Paris. It was an extremely well-painted piece with fine, detailed brushstrokes.

Everyone stood up to examine the plate from up close. Some of the students looked around nervously as if they had no idea what it was, but half of them seemed to know, holding their clipboards firmly and writing down their answers without hesitation.

Keiko and the other assistants walked around, staying out of the way as they looked at the answer sheets. Many of the students had written “Italian maiolica.” The confident ones had also written “16th century.” They were correct. Maiolica was a type of tin-glazed pottery made in Italy. It originated in the fifteenth century, and it was said that the technique had been refined in the sixteenth century. Pieces from that time period had more artistic value than those made in the nineteenth century.

Keiko walked behind Aoi and peeked at her answer sheet, wondering what she had written.

“Maiolica (16th century), authentic, by Duido Durantino”

Keiko gulped. She hadn't expected her to know even the artist.

“Here is the second piece,” the chief announced.

The next item was a jar depicting a black dragon on a white base. It had a round body that gently tapered towards the bottom. The dragon was painted in a wild manner and its face resembled a guardian lion.

Those who didn't know the details wrote “Chinese pottery.” There were also some who wrote “Chinese Cizhou ware.”

Aoi approached the jar until her nose was almost touching it. She looked troubled, and Keiko wondered if she didn't know the answer. Then, she adjusted her grip on her clipboard and wrote smoothly on the page as if she'd made up her mind.

“Hakuyu kuro kaki-otoshi ryumon hei” (White glaze jar with black scratched-finish dragon)

She wrote the name in Japanese characters. Apparently, she had hesitated because she didn't know how to translate it into English. The only other person who was able to answer this one was an African-American student.

The third item was a teddy bear. In 1902, then-U.S. President Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt was on a hunting trip and failed to kill his quarry. The hunters accompanying him shot a bear and suggested that he finish it off, but Roosevelt refused, saying that it was unsportsmanlike to shoot a dying bear. A reporter who was present wrote a newspaper article about it, which included an illustration of a cute bear cub. Inspired by the story, a man named Morris Michtom started a company to manufacture stuffed bears. Those were said to be the first teddy bears in America. Around the same time, a German company called Steiff exported stuffed bears to the U.S. for reasons unrelated to the story about the president. Some say that Steiff was the true creator of the first teddy bear. Either way, that newspaper article was the world's first media appearance of the name “teddy bear.”

The students' reactions to the teddy bear were divided in two: those who happily wrote down their answers and those who looked puzzled. Aoi was in

the latter group. She didn't seem to know much about teddy bears.

The teddy bear was made of whitish mohair and had a light brown nose. Like a real grizzly bear, it had a hump on its back. This was typical of Steiff's early teddy bears. It was probably a genuine article made around 1905.

Unable to reach that conclusion, Aoi simply wrote "Teddy bear, authentic." Meanwhile, the student from Paris was knowledgeable about teddy bears and wrote a model answer.

Pieces of art continued to be placed on the table one after another. There was Delft pottery, a porcelain plaque, Bohemian glass, Lalique glass art, and an antique doll. Aoi was skilled at identifying pottery, but she didn't seem familiar with glass or dolls. The student from Paris was the best at those.

When everything had been brought out and the students had filled out every field on the answer sheets, the chief assistant instructed them to turn over the page. Then, she set up an easel and placed a painting on it. The students' eyes widened when they saw it. It was Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Upon closer inspection, they realized it was only a photograph.

"Of course," they said, relaxing.

Sally slowly stood up and looked at everyone. "Anyone can be a curator if they have knowledge and taste. But in order to rise up, you need an eye for appraisal and keen senses." She placed her hand on the picture frame. "This is a photo of one of Vermeer's most famous works, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. I'm sure you're familiar with it. It's also known as *Girl with a Blue Turban*. Some even call it the 'Mona Lisa of the North.'"

Everyone nodded silently.

"There are many theories as to the identity of the subject, but we still don't know for sure who she was. So I want to see what you think. As you know, there's no correct answer. Don't worry about the prevailing theories. Just write your honest impressions."

As soon as Sally finished talking, the students started writing.

"I think this girl was Vermeer's beloved partner. I can feel his love for her from the light in her eyes and the glossiness of her lips."

That was written by the student from Paris. She seemed to have perceived that from Vermeer's brushstrokes.

"Vermeer had a hard life and wouldn't have been able to afford to hire a model. So the girl is his daughter. I don't feel romantic love from her gaze. Her eyes are those of someone looking at their father."

That was written by the African-American student. Unlike the Parisian student, she focused on the subject's expression.

Keiko went around looking at the other students' answers. She arrived at Aoi last and stood beside her. The young lady was still staring fixedly at the photo.

Finally, Aoi returned to her seat, seeming to have gotten her thoughts in order. She began to write, using the translating device to look up the words she wanted to convey.

"I think she's Vermeer's daughter because she's making a very vulnerable expression as she turns around. The look in her eyes and her slightly open mouth give me the impression that she doesn't feel shy or reserved around others. It looks like her father is calling for her, and she's turning around and replying, 'What?' However, the painting conveys a faint sense of romantic love. I think it might be because as Vermeer was painting his grown daughter, he saw his wife's younger self in her."

Keiko hummed as she read Aoi's answer. There was a theory that the subject of *Girl with a Pearl Earring* was Vermeer's daughter. However, as another student wrote, some speculated that she was a woman in love because of the glossiness of her lips. Keiko obviously didn't know the right answer, but Aoi's idea that combined both aspects made sense to her.

Sally saw Aoi using the translating device and frowned in suspicion. "You over there. What are you doing?"

Aoi quickly stood up and said, "I was using a translator" in broken English. She showed Sally the device.

"You can't speak English?"

"Yes." Aoi bowed.

“Well, it’s better than nothing. I dislike people who don’t do anything to make up for their deficiencies. However, keep in mind that while you may be able to go shopping with a translator, you won’t be able to achieve mutual understanding. In this world, not being able to communicate properly is a bottleneck,” Sally said sternly.

“I understand,” Aoi replied with a serious expression, bowing again.

Keiko pressed her hand to her forehead. *She might get dropped because of that.*

Sally reviewed the answer sheets that had been collected. She looked at two of the students and said, “Mm, you and you. I’m sorry, but I’ll have to ask you to leave. Thank you for coming. As a souvenir, please pick up complimentary tickets to the Met from one of my assistants.”

The rejected students hadn’t been able to answer most of the questions. They left the conference room in low spirits, but they didn’t seem dissatisfied. They had probably been expecting this outcome.

That left five. Next, the chief placed the suitcase on the table and opened it all the way. There was a huge pile of pottery shards inside, surrounded by packing material. For a second, it looked like the suitcase had been full of tea bowls that had broken while in transit, but that wasn’t the case. Sally had prepared these shards on purpose.

“At first glance, it’s just broken pottery. Some people will see it as worthless junk. But there are valuable pieces in here, and I want you to dig them up. Doesn’t that sound fun?” she said with a smile.

The students turned pale. Of course they would—even the assistants would struggle with this task. Sally had probably received a request from a client who believed there was treasure somewhere in this pile. Before making the assistants comb through it, she decided to have the students try it first.

Some of the students already looked like they wanted to go home. Keiko glanced at Aoi, wondering what her reaction was, only to see that the young lady’s eyes were sparkling.

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt by the shards, so give them gloves,” Sally

instructed the assistants.

Keiko walked up to Aoi.

“Oh, it’s okay, Keiko. I have my own,” Aoi said with a smile, taking a pair of white non-slip appraisal gloves from her pocket.

Keiko nodded and placed a hand on her hip. “This test is harder than I expected.”

“Yes, but like she said, it sounds fun. It’s like treasure hunting.”

“Huh? It sounds fun?” Keiko blinked.

“You may begin,” said Sally, clapping her hands.

“Okay.” Aoi nodded and walked up to the suitcase full of pottery shards. She stared at them for a while.

The other students looked baffled. They stood still, unable to even reach for the shards. On the other hand, Aoi picked one up and nodded, seeming convinced. It was a blue piece with specks of reddish-brown glaze.

“This is authentic,” she said in broken English.

“Sure, so you think it’s real. But do you know what it is?” Sally pressed.

Aoi looked down, troubled.

“You don’t know, do you?”

Aoi shook her head. “I know, but I can’t say it in English, and it’s not showing up on the translator.”

“Oh?” Sally’s eyes widened. She chuckled and said in Japanese, “That’s fine. I know Japanese, so answer in Japanese.”

Aoi and the other assistants all looked equally surprised. “You know Japanese?”

“Yes, a little. Now answer my question.” Sally looked at the young lady expectantly.

“O-Okay. This is a piece of blue glaze Jun ware from the Northern Song dynasty,” Aoi replied without hesitation. Keiko, who was standing beside her,

instinctively gulped.

“What makes you think that?” Sally asked, switching back to English.

“The glossy texture of the colored glaze, as well as the thickness of the glaze, which you can see from the broken edge. Also, the fact that the inside of the foot is glazed. All of these are characteristics of blue glaze Jun ware,” Aoi explained with ease.

Sally’s expression changed.

Aoi looked back at the suitcase and pointed to a light blue shard. “I believe this is a piece of pale blue porcelain, also from the Northern Song dynasty.” Next, she turned her attention to a gray shard with a black and white pattern on it and murmured, “And this one is—”

“That’s enough from you. I hate wasting time. There’s no point in you continuing.”

Aoi froze. She was understandably distraught that her efforts had been deemed a waste of time.

“You’ve passed the test. Take a seat.”

Yoshie and Rikyu, who had been quietly watching by the wall, secretly pumped their fists. Keiko realized she’d unknowingly been clenching her fists as well and gave a strained smile.

“Thank you,” said Aoi, returning to her seat.

Keiko patted her on the back. “Congratulations.”

“Th-Thank you. I was really nervous.” Aoi had seemed calm and confident, but apparently, she had been frantically trying to keep herself together. Now that she was free from the pressure, she slumped in her chair, her cheeks flushed and her eyes wet with tears. “It was a valuable experience, though. Thank you, Keiko.” She smiled, still teary-eyed. The sight resembled a flower blooming.

Keiko almost muttered, “So cute,” without thinking. She quickly shook her head.

“Keiko?”

“Sorry. Even I was nervous watching you. I was already impressed when we met before, but you really are amazing, Aoi,” the assistant said sincerely.

Aoi shook her head lightly. “I still have a long way to go.” One would think she was being modest, but her expression was serious.

“That’s not true. You’re still Kiyotaka’s apprentice, right?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“He knows what he’s doing, huh?”

“Yes...he really is great,” Aoi said with a listless chuckle.

I’d expect her to feel proud when someone compliments her boyfriend, but that’s not the mood I’m sensing. Keiko tilted her head, finding it strange. Suddenly, she sensed someone’s gaze. She looked up and saw Sally staring in their direction. She fell silent, wondering if they were making too much noise while the test was still ongoing. The other students were still struggling in front of the suitcase.

After nearly an hour, the budding curators had been reduced to Aoi, an African-American girl from Los Angeles named Chloe, and a beautiful blonde girl from Paris named Amelie.

Sally smiled at the three remaining students. “Congratulations. You are now my honor students. From now on, no matter where you go, you can proclaim that Sally chose you. It should be a useful asset.”

The students beamed at each other.

“Now, there’s something I’d like you to do for me.”

The three students straightened their backs.

“An artist was supposed to be holding an exhibition in a few days on the top floor of a building owned by a family-oriented fashion brand. However, the artist was arrested for a crime, and for the sake of public image, the exhibition was canceled. We need to prepare another event, but because of the short notice, we don’t have time to develop it properly.”

Everyone nodded silently.

“I thought, in that case, why not have undeveloped people make it? So the plan has changed to an exhibition of works by art students that have caught my eye. I call it ‘Budding Artists of the Future.’ Not a bad concept, right? We’re working on it right now, and I’d like to have you three produce one of the sections.”

“Huh?” The students’ eyes widened.

“You’re going to produce a themed showcase of works by art college students. It’ll be an exhibit by Sally Ballymore’s recognized budding artists and curators. Doesn’t that sound lovely? My assistants will provide support, of course.”

Oh, that could be an interesting experiment. Keiko and the other assistants nodded.

In addition to the Vermeer and Meegeren exhibition, Sally was in charge of planning an exhibition for a company that managed a family-oriented fashion brand. The original plan was to display the works of an artist who was popular for their picture book covers. Their art was beautiful and fantastical, and it was supposed to be an event that both adults and children could enjoy. However, the situation had changed when the artist was arrested on suspicion of domestic violence under the influence of drugs. Sally had to come up with another plan as soon as possible. She had called together some art students whose work she endorsed, but she wanted another topic to highlight. Having the budding curators work on it was impromptu but not a bad idea under the circumstances.

That said, for the honor students, this was coming out of nowhere. Their eyes were wide open in shock.

“Oh, yes. My parents’ house is uptown, and you’re free to use it while you’re staying in New York. I won’t be going there, my father has already passed away, and my mother is in the hospital. The only person living there is a caretaker, so there’s no need to be reserved. Now, here’s your assignment: starting tomorrow, you’ll spend three days touring Manhattan and its museums, including the Met. On the fourth day, you’ll present your plan and carry it out.” Sally paused before continuing, “Also, I already spread the word that I would be

selecting honor students today. Tonight, I'll be holding a party to introduce you to people in the industry, so please be ready for that."

The students' eyes widened even more.

"I have to prepare for the party too, so I'll be excusing myself now. If you have any questions, ask my assistants," Sally said before swiftly leaving the conference room with the chief.

The three students looked at each other.

"This is a lot more than I was expecting," Chloe murmured, dumbfounded.

"Yeah," said Amelie.

Aoi nodded in agreement, but her eyes were sparkling with glee. "But it's exciting to be given such a big opportunity."

"That's true." The other students' expressions brightened.

"I'm Chloe Taylor. What're your names?"

"Amelie Michel."

"I'm Aoi Mashiro."

The three students looked at each other and formed a circle. "Let's ace this assignment!"

Keiko watched the heartwarming scene with a smile. Meanwhile, the assistant next to her murmured, "I feel bad for those girls, being used by Sally too."

"Used?" Keiko looked the assistant in the eye.

"Sally said she already informed everyone that she was selecting honor students, but don't you think it all happened too suddenly?"

"Yes." Keiko nodded.

"Sally wants that project to succeed no matter what. That's why—"

The assistant saw the three honor students looking their way and closed her mouth, fearing that they had overheard the conversation. However, the girls quickly resumed their cheerful chat. Keiko placed a hand on her chest in relief.

For these girls, who aspired to become curators, this project was a huge opportunity and a dream come true. But it seemed that there were some complicated circumstances and scheming going on behind the scenes.

They might have their work cut out for them. Keiko crossed her arms, a grim look on her face as she watched the three excited students.

[3] A Request from Hopkins

1

Keiko drove me and the other honor students to an area of Uptown Manhattan that was known for its upscale neighborhoods. In Kyoto terms, it was similar to Rakuhoku, maybe? Sally Barrymore's parents' house was in a prime location near the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the Upper East Side, the neighborhood east of Central Park. Many of the residences in this area were townhouses, so at first glance, they looked like fancy apartments. The one belonging to Sally's parents was bigger than the others in its row. Its white exterior and green roof gave it an elegant, traditional appearance.

Holding my suitcase, I looked up at the building in awe.

"I didn't think there'd be houses like this in Manhattan," murmured Chloe.

"It's lovely," said Amelie, clapping her hands together.

"Sally's late father was very wealthy," said Keiko. "She's from a rich family."

The three of us nodded in understanding. Behind us was Rikyu, who had offered to accompany us as a bodyguard and received permission to stay at the house with us. Keiko had vouched for him, explaining to Sally that he had a black belt in judo despite his looks. Sally's response had been a nonchalant "Do as you please." Chloe and Amelie didn't have a problem with it either, even after being informed that he was a guy. As for Yoshie, she had work to do in New York, so she generally wouldn't be with us during the day. But she did say to contact her immediately if we needed help.

We rang the doorbell and received a warm welcome from the caretaker.

"Let's go see the art students' work before the party," said Keiko. "I'll come back later to pick you up."

She got back in the driver's seat, and we thanked her and entered the house.

After being shown to our rooms and putting down our luggage, we sat at the

dining table in the living room to take a break, drinking the coffee the caretaker prepared for us.

“Hey, what did you think about Keiko’s conversation with the other assistant?” Chloe asked, leaning forward slightly as she sipped her coffee.

“Oh, about how we’re being used?” Amelie gave a playful laugh.

My translating device was quite good. When I spoke in Japanese, it translated the words into English and played the audio out loud. Although it meant communicating through a machine, it was much better than nothing getting across at all.

The three of us had heard what Keiko and the other assistant were talking about. I looked up at the ceiling, thinking back to what they had said.

“I feel bad for those girls, being used by Sally too.”

“Sally wants that project to succeed no matter what. That’s why—”

“I wonder what the project is,” I murmured to myself.

“Oh,” said Chloe. “I heard that Sally’s working on a really big job right now. The assistant who invited me was talking about it.”

Amelie and I hummed.

“She said a new building was built on Fifth Avenue, and there’s gonna be an art exhibition on the top floor called ‘Light and Shadow: Vermeer and Meegeren.’ It’s gonna display both artists’ works at once. What’s more, it opens on the same day as the exhibition we’re working on.”

The idea of exhibiting not only Vermeer’s works, but also those of Meegeren—who was known for his Vermeer forgeries—sounded interesting.

“Vermeer is really popular, and Meegeren’s forgeries are a hot topic right now,” said Amelie. “He’s gaining popularity too.”

I nodded as I listened to them.

“Sally’s putting a lot of effort into that exhibition, and according to her assistant, she really doesn’t have time to hang out with us budding curators,” Chloe explained.

“That makes sense.” I nodded again. Not only was Sally busy with the Vermeer exhibition, the artist for the other one she was working on had been arrested. She surely had her hands full dealing with the chaos.

“Then the project that has to succeed ‘no matter what’ is the Vermeer and Meegeren exhibition, right?” Amelie said with conviction.

“Yeah, but I don’t know what it has to do with us. How are we being used?” Chloe threw up her hands.

“That’s a good question,” I replied. *What use could we possibly have in the first place?* “If I recall correctly, we were invited here because a famous curator insulted Sally by saying, ‘We don’t need women in this world,’ right?”

“Yeah,” said Chloe, looking up. “Do you guys know who said it?”

“No.” Amelie and I shook our heads. Thinking about it, no one had told me, and I’d never asked.

“Well, you see...” Chloe proudly held up her index finger. “The news spread all over the industry, but the name of the perp was never disclosed. Sally herself says she was insulted like that by a famous male curator, but she won’t reveal the guy’s name. Some people in the industry are trying to figure out who did it and making accusations, but the only people who know the truth are her assistants.”

I hummed as I listened to her explanation.

“So who said it? You know who it was, right?” Amelie asked impatiently.

“It was Yohei Shinohara.”

“What?” Amelie’s eyes widened.

I remembered the article I had read in the in-flight magazine. The person in question had seemed very gentlemanly and kind. He definitely didn’t look like the kind of person who would make misogynistic remarks.

Amelie muttered, “No way. I can’t believe Yohei Shinohara would say such a thing. I thought he was the chivalrous type.” She seemed just as dumbfounded as I was.

“I was surprised too, but apparently, Shinohara and Sally both apprenticed

under Thomas Hopkins. In other words, they used to be fellow students,” Chloe explained.

“I didn’t know that,” I murmured.

“They’re rivals, or like, old enemies even. So maybe they were just arguing and he said that in the heat of the moment. I think Sally knows that too, which is why she didn’t publicize his name.”

Amelie and I nodded.

“Maybe there’s some spite involved, though. Training ‘budding curators’ is something Shinohara does a lot.”

“That sounds likely. Sally puts effort into discovering new artists who will lead the next generation, but she never showed interest in fostering curators until now.” Amelie crossed her arms, convinced.

We talked about ourselves after that. I learned that Chloe was studying various art-related things at a university in Los Angeles. Amelie was a university student too, majoring in art history at a school in Paris. She had a relative who worked at the Louvre.

I told them I was studying history at Kyoto Prefectural University. When I said that I could obtain a curator certification by earning the right credits there, they tilted their heads in confusion.

“Does that mean you aren’t studying art?” asked Chloe.

“But you were amazing when you appraised the pottery shards,” said Amelie.

I shrugged. “I work part-time at an antique store, so I learn about art there.”

The two girls hummed, intrigued.

After we chatted for a while, Rikyu spoke up. “Uhh, guys...” He had been sitting on a sofa a short distance away from the dining table, drinking coffee. “You seem to be taking it easy, but isn’t Keiko coming to pick you up? Shouldn’t you be getting ready?”

We gasped and looked at each other.

“Oh no, we need to hurry,” said Chloe.

We hastily got up.

2

Keiko happened to arrive just as we finished preparing to leave. First, we headed to an art school to see the exhibition pieces. None of the students were there because it was a weekend evening, but that made it easier to focus on the art.

We were brought to a classroom crammed full of artwork. There were paintings, pottery, sculptures, glasswork, objets d'art, clocks—the list went on. As one would expect from students that had caught the eye of a well-known curator, every piece was high-level and shone with individuality.

I looked around at the art, sighing in admiration. “It’s like a treasure trove.”

“Yeah, this is so exciting,” said Chloe.

“They’re all so lovely that I can’t focus on any one thing,” said Amelie.

The thought of being able to use these for an exhibition made my heart leap with joy. We excitedly looked at each piece one by one. Keiko and Rikyu watched us from a distance.

I looked through all of the non-painting works and went back to an item on a shelf that had caught my attention. It was a piece of wired cloisonné ware that was reminiscent of Yasuyuki Namikawa. The illustrated plants and birds looked youthful and delicate.

While I was absorbed in the cloisonné ware, Chloe was looking excitedly at a cat-like objet d'art and Amelie was fascinated by a glass goblet.

After our initial inspection, we put on gloves and examined the tightly packed paintings propped up against the walls. All of them were amazing, but the one that caught my eye was one that reminded me of ukiyo-e despite not being by a Japanese artist. It was themed around the four seasons: cherry blossoms for spring, hydrangeas for summer, red leaves for autumn, and camellias for winter, with birds and cats nestled among them. Each flower was painted with intricate detail, as was the kimono pattern.

I looked to see if there were any other pieces by the same artist and found a large painting of a whale. When thinking of whales in ukiyo-e, Kuniyoshi Utagawa's *Musashi Miyamoto Subduing the Whale* comes to mind. As the title suggested, it was based on the legend of early Edo period swordsman Musashi Miyamoto defeating a whale. It depicted Musashi Miyamoto on top of a giant whale amidst stormy waves, driving his sword into its body. However, this whale painting was the complete opposite. It depicted a huge whale swimming calmly in the water. The whale's eyes were gentle, but the creature inspired fear nonetheless. It felt like a painting of a god.

While I stood there in awe, Chloe was oohing and aahing over another painting. "This one is nice!"

The one that had won her favor was a landscape painting that looked like a scene outside a window. It had a sprawling forest full of fictional animals, but not familiar ones like unicorns or qilin. According to the description, they were all inventions of the artist's imagination. The use of color was truly innovative, and it was painted with carefree brushstrokes. It was a stellar example of contemporary art.

"Hey, there's a great one over here," said Amelie. We turned to look. "On the back, it says, 'In honor of Mucha, who I love and respect very much.'"

As the dedication indicated, the painting was an homage to Alphonse Maria Mucha. It depicted the glamorous French royal family with Queen Marie Antoinette lounging on a sofa. Like Mucha's art, it was painted in a Byzantine style with a circular halo in the back. The title was *That's My Friend*.

It's a painting of Marie Antoinette, but the artist is calling her their friend? What does that mean?

Chloe seemed to be wondering the same thing. She looked just as puzzled as me.

"Oh my, you two." Amelie put her hand over her mouth. "It's referring to *C'est mon ami*, a song composed by Marie Antoinette."

Chloe and I hummed and looked at the painting. Though it was an homage, the artist's own skill was on full display. It was filled with originality, admiration for the French royal family, and love for Marie Antoinette. I didn't know what

the song composed by Antoinette sounded like, but I felt like I could hear music coming from the painting.

“It really is great,” I murmured earnestly.

“Right?” Amelie looked proud to have found it. “Mucha was a Czech painter, but he first achieved success in Paris. As a Parisian, I feel an attachment to him. I’d like to exhibit this piece and have an overall Art Nouveau theme.”

“Oh?” Chloe folded her arms. “The one I liked isn’t bad either. Besides, this is New York, so let’s make a more New York-esque exhibit.”

“If people like us try to make a New York-esque exhibit in the real New York, it’s going to come across as half-baked. We might as well do something completely different.”

“You have a point. Aoi, what do you think? Which pieces did you like?”

“Huh?” I blinked, startled by Chloe’s question being directed my way. Suddenly, all eyes were on me. I stumbled over my words for a second before replying honestly, “I liked the cloisonné ware and the paintings that looked like ukiyo-e.”

“Well, they *are* nice...”

“But if we display those, the East Asian aesthetic—specifically Japonism—is going to take over.”

With our opinions completely divided, we inadvertently fell silent.

“Well,” I said with a smile, “we can decide what to do after seeing the venue and touring the museums.”

“Yeah.” The other two students smiled and nodded at my suggestion.

They’re quick to switch gears and seem like they’ll be easy to work with. That’s a relief.

“Yes, that’s right,” said Keiko, who had been watching us. “It’s too soon to come to a conclusion. Besides, it’s almost time for the party. Let’s head over.”

“Oh, right!” We’d completely forgotten about the party.

We took off our gloves and hurried out of the classroom.

Sally's unveiling party for her honor students was held on the top floor of a building in Midtown. It was the one owned by a family-oriented fashion brand—the venue that was originally going to host a picture book cover artist's exhibition. Following the artist's arrest, the new plan was to display works by art college students who had caught Sally's eye.

The large hall was filled with people who seemed to be Sally's invited industry guests and media representatives with cameras. It was a buffet-style party. Everyone was holding glasses and looking at us honor students as we stood in a row next to Sally.

Chloe was wearing a simple chic silver dress with a wide neckline, while Amelie wore a scarlet dress with a wide open back. I was wearing the black dress that Holmes had given me as a gift.

Sally picked up the microphone and looked around at the crowd. "Thank you for gathering here tonight, everyone. Many of the esteemed art curators in the world today have worked at famous museums and built up impressive track records. I am fortunate to be one of those people. However, even if one has talent and ability, it is only a lucky few who have the opportunity to work at a museum. I decided I wanted to find the budding curators out there in the world and give them the chance to be my honor students. The project is still in its trial stage, but these are the first students I have selected," she said, turning to us.

Suddenly, all eyes were on us and we were bombarded with camera flashes. A microphone was passed over. Chloe, who came from Los Angeles, introduced herself first, then gave the mic to Amelie from Paris. Then it was my turn. Overwhelmed by the bright lights and the crowd, I said in stilted English, "I'm Aoi Mashiro from Kyoto in Japan. Nice to meet you." I bowed.

Sally picked up her mic again and continued, "As I'm sure you've all heard, there's been a sudden change in the exhibition that is going to be held here. The new concept is Talent of the Future. In addition to exhibiting works of art by students who have my recognition, there will be a themed showcase produced by these girls here. Please expect great things from these young talents."

Her speech was followed by a loud round of applause. My face stiffened from the pressure, but I somehow managed to smile.

After the opening speech, everyone returned to their cheerful conversations. Although they had been called here by Sally, they didn't actually seem interested in her honor students. The three of us grouped up and sighed loudly.

"I thought I was going to faint from anxiety," said Chloe, placing her hand on her chest.

"Come to think of it, I only came here expecting a special lecture by Sally. No one told me about any of this," Amelie muttered.

"Yeah." I laughed and nodded.

Sensing someone's gaze, I turned around and saw Rikyu watching us from over by the wall. He had his arms crossed and was keeping a watchful eye on our surroundings. *He's acting like a real bodyguard*, I thought with a strained smile. *Maybe Holmes said something to him. I can't imagine why else he'd be so concerned about me. I should tell him to enjoy himself without worrying.*

Just as I was going to head over to him, someone called out to me, "Good evening." I turned to the side and saw a kindly old Caucasian man with white hair. He was smiling, and I felt as though I'd seen him somewhere before.

Unable to recall who he was, I simply replied, "Good evening."

"I've been looking forward to meeting you, Aoi."

"Huh?" I stiffened up. *Who is this person?*

"Oh, my apologies. My name is Thomas Hopkins."

"Oh!" I hurriedly bowed. Holmes and even Sally had trained under him before. He was one of the most influential figures in the art world. "Nice to meet you. I'm Aoi Mashiro."

"Kiyotaka told me all about you," he said, chuckling.

"Um, what did he say about me?" I asked, alarmed.

"Well, he called you an angel and a goddess."

Holmes... I face-palmed.

“When we met again, I was surprised to see how much he’d softened up. He must’ve changed after meeting you.”

I gave a vague smile, unsure how to respond.

“By the way, I heard that you and Kiyotaka sometimes play detective, although he didn’t seem to take kindly to it.”

I chuckled and nodded. “Yes. People come to him for help. That’s how he became known as the ‘Holmes of Kyoto.’”

“Does that make you his Watson?”

“No, I’m just an onlooker.”

“Oh, there’s no need to be modest. Kiyotaka said there were several times your point of view led him to the answer.”

“That’s not true.” I shook my head, surprised that Holmes had said so much.

“Well, I’d like to request help from his lovely assistant too. Would that be all right?”

“Huh?” I blinked.

Hopkins was smiling, but his eyes were serious.

“Is it a problem I’d be able to solve?”

“Who knows? Even if you can’t solve it, will you at least hear me out?”

I nodded hesitantly.

“Sally is an important student of mine. There was another student I was teaching at the same time: a Japanese person like you named Yohei Shinohara. They were originally very close, but about twenty-five years ago, they fell out over a difference of opinion. They’re essentially not on speaking terms anymore.”

“A difference of opinion?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know the details. I only heard that they had clashed over something. No one would answer me when I asked. So I would like to know what happened,” he said sadly, looking at Sally. For a teacher, it must have been painful to see his students become so estranged. “I’d appreciate it if you

could look into it, only as much as you can.”

“If that’s all, then sure. Um, is it okay if I ask my colleagues to help?”

“Of course.” He nodded.

“But why are you asking me? Sally has a lot of assistants.”

“Indeed she does.” He gave a strained smile. “I’ve tried asking them before, naturally. But it was no good.”

“No good?”

“None of them would answer me, either because Sally forbade it or they truly didn’t know. One of the reasons I’m asking you is because Sally doesn’t have that much power over you. Another is that you students have a high chance of coming into contact with Yohei.”

“How so?”

“Yohei strives to nurture talented students. It’s something of a hobby for him—he always wants to meet gems in the rough. Even though he and Sally are estranged, he’d still be interested in the honor students who met her standards. I think he might try to contact you in a way that she won’t notice.”

“I see...”

“Also, you’re the woman who thawed Kiyotaka’s heart. You might make another miracle happen.”

My eyes widened at the word “miracle.”

“You may be surprised when I say that, but I was even more surprised when I saw him. He was a man who always kept the shutters of his heart closed. I never thought I’d be able to see him bragging about his girlfriend.” He chuckled as if remembering the scene, his shoulders shaking. “Now then, where is Sally?” He looked up and scanned the surroundings. The hall was full of people, so he couldn’t spot her.

“I’ll look for her,” I offered, quickly leaving to search for Sally. I couldn’t make an elderly man do it.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t find her either. I saw Keiko chatting with a guest and

asked her, "Do you know where Sally is right now?"

"I think she just left the hall. She might be fixing her makeup."

"Thank you."

I left the hall and saw figures that looked like Sally and the chief assistant turning at the end of the hallway. I went in that direction.

"A request came in from Alderley..."

"Can you turn it down? I'm too busy."

"Apparently something shocking was brought in. They insisted that you take a look at it."

Just before I turned the corner, the chief's whispering made me stop in my tracks.

"What is it?" asked Sally.

"An Eastern antique. If it's authentic, the news will make waves worldwide."

I gulped and craned my neck to peek around the corner. They were standing with their backs to me, looking at the chief's tablet. It seemed to be open to a picture of the antique in question.

"This has to be a joke, right?" Sally's tone of voice changed.

What in the world could be on that screen? Unable to hold back my curiosity, I crept forward to sneak a peek at the picture. However, the chief closed it before I could see anything.

"So when?" asked Sally.

"The day after tomorrow."

"All right. Tell them I'll do it." Sally turned around and furrowed her brows at me in suspicion. "What's the matter?"

"Um, Mr. Hopkins was looking for you."

"Oh, I see. Thanks," she said nonchalantly, briskly returning to the hall. I followed her, and upon reentering the hall, I saw her walk up to the elderly man with a big smile on her face. "I didn't know you were here, Mr. Hopkins."

“Yes, I just arrived.”

“Thank you for coming. Please, come this way.”

Sally was all smiles. I almost didn’t recognize her. *I’m finally realizing that Hopkins really is an amazing person.*

As I watched them, I thought about the elderly man’s request and folded my arms. *How should I approach this? Is there anyone here who’d know about Sally and Yohei Shinohara?* As I contemplated, I went back to where Chloe and Amelie were. They excitedly ran up to me.

“Aoi, were you talking to Thomas Hopkins?”

“That’s incredible! Do you know each other?”

Rikyu came over too, leaving his post by the wall. “So that’s Hopkins,” he muttered.

Apparently, the man was very famous. I felt a little ashamed of my ignorance.

“I’m actually helping him with something right now,” I began.

“What is it?” Chloe and Amelie asked, leaning forward expectantly.

“He wants me to find out why his favorite students, Sally and Yohei Shinohara, had a falling out.”

The two exchanged glances before looking back at me.

“Why would he ask you to do that?”

“Can’t he just ask her assistants?”

Their questions were logical. I shrugged as I gave them a summary of the circumstances.

“So I was hoping you two might be willing to help,” I said timidly.

“Sure.” They nodded.

“I don’t really know what’s going on, but building goodwill with Hopkins can only be a good thing,” said Amelie.

“I agree,” Chloe added.

Their eyes sparkled. They seemed highly motivated.

“Thanks,” I said, taking their hands. “There must be a lot of people from the industry at this party, so I’m thinking we should split up and gather information here first.”

“Got it.”

“Leave it to me.”

They immediately went off in different directions. They seemed to be asking the people who had spoken to them before, in an indirect way, of course.

Rikyu looked at me with an exasperated shrug. “Sorry, but I’m not helping.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. Also, you don’t have to stick with me the whole time, you know? You should go out and enjoy New York.”

He chuckled. “Well, I’m enjoying myself enough as it is, so don’t worry. Anyway, are you gonna ask around too?”

“Yeah. If possible, I want to find Japanese people to talk to.”

I could use the translating device to have conversations in English, but the best scenario would be if there was someone Japanese who knew the situation.

I left Rikyu and began looking for Japanese guests.

4

“As a compatriot, I’m very happy that someone from Japan was chosen as Sally’s honor student. Where are you studying, by the way? Huh? Kyoto Prefectural University? Well, you can get a Japanese certification there, but it’s not a school for someone aiming to be a worldwide curator.”

There was no need to search for a Japanese person in the hall because one approached me on his own. He was a man in his thirties, and according to his business card, he was a freelance writer named Takao Ishida. With his fashionably unkempt hair, glasses, and thin beard, he really fit the image of a freelance writer working in New York City.

“When I was in high school, my priority was getting a curator certification,” I replied. “I worked hard to get into a prefectural university because a private

one would be a burden on my parents.”

“How admirable.” The man stroked his chin. “But for Sally to approve of you, you must have knowledge and a discerning eye. How did you obtain those?”

“I work part-time at an antique store called Kura. It’s in Teramachi-Sanjo in Kyoto.”

“Ah.” He nodded firmly. “Nationally certified appraiser Seiji Yagashira’s store. I see.”

I gulped at how well-informed he was. “Um, speaking of Japanese people, I was hoping to learn more about Yohei Shinohara. He and Sally were both Hopkins’s students, right?” I asked casually.

“That’s right.” Ishida nodded. “They get along so poorly now that people call them archrivals, but in the past, they were so close that there were rumors they were dating.”

“I see. What if they really were?” If they were formerly a couple, that could explain why Sally could speak a little Japanese. It would also make sense for them to be estranged now. There could be some complicated relationship drama only they knew about.

“I don’t know.” Ishida tilted his head. “Shinohara is the hardworking type. His family used to be rich, but they lost everything when his father’s company went bankrupt after the bubble burst. Shinohara studied hard and was able to get a job at MoMA, which is why he’s successful now. On the other hand, there are rumors that Sally got her job at the Met through her rich parents’ connections. Of course, she did have talent and skill, but there are tons of people in this industry who don’t get to work at a famous museum, no matter how talented they are. Shinohara acknowledged Sally’s talent, but he didn’t seem to like how she had gotten where she was. And Sally, being who she was, seemed to have a complex about people thinking she was riding on her parents’ coattails. Maybe that’s what led to things blowing up?” he mused, scratching his head.

“But something had to trigger the explosion. What do you think it could be?” I asked forwardly.

Ishida hummed. “Well, rumor says it was a difference of opinion. No one was

particularly interested in their quarrel, so the matter was never pursued in depth.”

“Oh.” Suddenly, I remembered the conversation I’d overheard between Sally and the chief assistant. “By the way, do you know the name Alderley?”

His eyes widened in surprise. “How do you know that name?”

“I happened to hear it.”

“I see. Oh, you know what? I know someone who’s knowledgeable about curators. Do you want me to introduce you?”

“Yes, please.” I nodded.

“All right. Email me at the address on my business card. And give me your phone number.” He grinned.

“Okay.” I held his business card in my hands, happy that it seemed like I’d reach the truth sooner than expected.

Sensing a strong gaze, I turned around and saw Rikyu looking in my direction with very cold eyes. I held up the business card to signal to him that I’d found a lead. He placed a hand on his forehead, seeming exasperated. *Why would he do that?* I wondered, tilting my head. I put the business card in my bag.

I want to make the themed exhibit a success. I also want to live up to Hopkins’s expectations.

Filled with determination, I placed a clenched fist on my chest.

[4] Manhattan Museums

1

The next day, Chloe, Amelie, and I began our museum tour, with Rikyu tagging along. Our first stop was the Metropolitan Museum of Art, one of the world's largest art museums. The size of its collection rivaled that of the British Museum in London, the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, and the Louvre in Paris. The building had a stately stone exterior with splendidly detailed carvings. It reminded me of a Parisian castle.

"It's designed by Hunt. An orthodox beauty," Rikyu said happily. He adored beautiful architecture.

"Hunt?" I hadn't heard the name before.

"Richard Morris Hunt. He was the first American to be admitted to the school of architecture at France's École des Beaux-Arts. He's well-known in America as a pioneer who established architects' position in society."

Every world has its ambitious creators who create noble things. A museum building is a work of art too.

It was said that the Metropolitan Museum of Art couldn't be fully explored in a day. If you had a set amount of time to spend there, you had to narrow down what you wanted to see. We decided to each pick our own priorities and meet at the rooftop garden around noon.

As it turned out, the three of us had very different tastes. After splitting up, we went in completely different directions. Chloe went to look at modern art, while Amelie went to see European decorative art.

"So where are you going, Aoi?" asked Rikyu, who was still following me.

"I know it sounds generic, but I want to see for myself the works of art I've read about in textbooks. What about you, Rikyu?"

"I'm fine with that too. I wanna know how it feels to see those famous works

in real life.”

And so we went around to see the iconic works of art. Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Renoir, Monet... Rodin’s *The Thinker* was on display in the hallway, and as Holmes had told me, visitors were allowed to touch it. Many people were doing so.

If an exhibition of these artists was to be held in Japan, it would be huge news. The museum would surely have long lines every day. But here, while there were a lot of visitors, it wasn’t so packed that you couldn’t see the art. You could move around freely and stand in front of paintings for as long as you wanted. Photography was allowed for most pieces, so everyone was taking pictures with their phones.

I’d always seen these works of art in textbooks, so it felt strange viewing them from close enough to breathe on them. If they were displayed in Japan, you’d have to stand farther back. But even though you could be physically close to the artworks here, their history and the envy they’d received over the years gave them a divine aura.

“I like this painter,” said Rikyu.

He was talking about Giovanni Paolo Panini, an Italian painter and architect. Panini’s landscapes, such as *Interior of Saint Peter’s*, were beautifully detailed and depicted a fantastical world that made you want to look at them forever.

As Rikyu took pictures of the paintings, he murmured passionately, “I can’t believe I can see one of my favorite artist’s works from this close and even take photos of them. It’s like a dream come true.”

“Yeah... I wish Japan’s museums would let you get this close.”

“Japan’s museums are great, but they all feel weirdly distant and posh.”

I giggled and nodded. “It’s true. It’d be nice if you could go to them more casually.”

We continued to look around the vast museum. Realizing that it was almost time to regroup with the others, we took the elevator near the first-floor modern art section to the rooftop garden. Upon stepping outside, we were greeted by a breathtaking view of Central Park and the Manhattan skyline. I

couldn't help but spread my arms and exclaim, "Wow! What an amazing view."

"Yeah," Rikyu murmured.

Chloe and Amelie hadn't arrived yet, so we decided to have coffee and enjoy the view.

"It's delicious," I said.

"Yeah. I heard American coffee was disgusting, but New York's is pretty good."

"Is it that bad?"

"Apparently, there are places that just serve coffee-colored drinks with no aroma. Well, that's what mom said."

"Yoshie is well traveled, huh?"

"New York is one of her favorite places. I think she said something like, 'New York has good beer and coffee, so I can survive on those alone.' Ugh, sounds like something a hopeless adult would say."

"I think it reflects her 'enjoy life' attitude. I'd never be able to live off those alone, though. I'd miss Japanese food too much."

"Well, mom lived in New York for about half a year, so I guess she can survive for that long without a problem."

My eyes widened. "Did Yoshie study abroad here?"

On our first night in New York, Yoshie had said, "If I'd come here when I was a student, I would've done everything I could have to be able to live here." Her wording had made me assume that her dream hadn't come true.

"Not quite. She dreamed of living in New York, so she went ahead and did it while I was studying in France. It was right before you started working at Kura."

"Oh, I see." I nodded, remembering the situation at the time. Kura had been short-staffed because of Rikyu studying abroad, so they had hired me part-time. And while Rikyu was in France, Yoshie was living in New York.

"Oh, right. I wasn't there, but do you remember the owner's birthday party at the Yagashira residence that fall?" he asked.

“Yeah.”

“The owner’s birthday is on August 8th, but the party was held in September because that’s when mom was back from New York. The owner thought of it as a welcome back party for her as well.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that.” I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“He’s cute, isn’t he?” Rikyu giggled.

I smiled and nodded.

Rikyu took his phone out of his pocket. It seemed like he’d received a message. He looked at the screen and gave an exasperated shrug. “I got a message from Haruka.”

“Huh? What does it say?”

“Look.” He showed me his phone.

“Sorry we didn’t get to chat much even though you went out of your way to visit. I was so surprised that you got a girlfriend. But she’s a lovely person, so I approve! Congrats! I wish you two the best!”

I panicked as I read the message, which was obviously an attempt at putting on a brave front. “She’s completely misunderstanding!”

“Yeah, seems so. She always jumps to the wrong conclusion.”

“Shouldn’t you clear things up with her?”

“It doesn’t matter. Dealing with her is a hassle.”

“You said that last time too. How could you think that?”

Rikyu simply replied to Haruka’s message with the word “Idiot” and put his phone in his pocket.

“Why would you reply that way?” I asked. It was clear that Haruka liked him, and he must’ve been aware of it too.

Rikyu said nothing.

“She’s special to you, isn’t she? Why else would you go out of your way to visit her?”

His face relaxed. As I was wondering what that expression meant, he pointed and said, “Look, they’re finally here.”

I turned around and saw Chloe and Amelie waving and running towards us. Judging from their flushed cheeks, they’d enjoyed the museum very much.

I must’ve looked like that too, I thought as I waved back.

2

Our afternoon destination was Sotheby’s, one of the world’s oldest auction houses. It had been founded in London in the eighteenth century and was now headquartered in New York City. I’d heard that in addition to auctions, they also displayed art and showed previews of the next items to be auctioned.

Since it was the headquarters of a historic auction house, I had been imagining a building in that vein, but it turned out to have a modern glass-fronted exterior. Inside, paintings were displayed at wide intervals on pure white walls. It was a simple and refined space.

A person nearby laughed and said, “This painting just looks like random scribbles.”

Indeed, there were many unconventional works here that would elicit such a response. Some of them had me tilting my head, clueless as to what was good about them. But what they all had in common was energy and passion. I could see how they might resonate with someone’s heart.

As I was looking at the paintings, Amelie tugged on my sleeve and said, “Wait, look over there.”

I looked where she was pointing and saw a gray-haired Japanese man talking with someone. It was Yohei Shinohara.

“You can’t ask for a better chance than this. Let’s go talk to him,” she said, heading in his direction. Chloe and I followed her.

Yohei Shinohara was talking in hushed Japanese with a Japanese woman in a suit.

“This piece was at Alderley before, right?”

“Yes. It seems that various things were done for it to be here now.”

“Tell the client it’ll be put up for auction.”

“Understood.”

Based on the distance between them and their tones of voice, the woman seemed to be his secretary.

“Speaking of Alderley, what ended up happening with that item?”

“Sally agreed to appraise it.”

“I expected as much.”

Is that what Sally and the chief were talking about at the party? I thought nervously. What is Alderley, anyway? Ishida seemed to know, but he didn’t tell me what it was.

“Hey, do you guys know what Alderley is?” I whispered.

Chloe, Amelie, and Rikyu all shrugged.

None of them know. I looked at Yohei Shinohara again.

“Hm?” The man looked over at us, having noticed our gazes. “Do you need something from me?”

We calmly approached him.

“You’re Yohei Shinohara, right? We’re students aspiring to become first-rate art curators,” said Amelie.

“It’s an honor to meet you,” added Chloe.

The two of them offered him a handshake without hesitation. I stood behind them and bowed.

Yohei Shinohara smiled as he shook their hands. Then he turned to me. “Are you Japanese?” he asked in our native language.

“Oh, yes. My name is Aoi Mashiro.”

“I thought so. Are you studying abroad?”

I hesitated for a moment before deciding to tell the truth. “We’re Sally Barrymore’s honor students.” I wanted to see how he would react.

His countenance instantly changed. “Oh. So this time, her plan is to use you to contact me. She knows I have a soft spot for students.”

The four of us exchanged glances, unsure what he was talking about.

“Tell Sally for me,” he spat in English, “that I’m not going to hand over that piece no matter what she does.” He turned his back to us and walked away.

We stared dumbfoundedly at him as he left.

3

Later, Keiko contacted us and brought us to see the exhibit that Sally was currently working on, Light and Shadow: Vermeer and Meegeren. After that, we returned to Sally’s parents’ house.

Although we were allowed to stay there, we had been told to prepare our own meals. We bought a huge pizza on the way back, placed it on the dining table, and toasted with canned beer.

“Hey, what do you think about what Yohei Shinohara said?” Amelie asked with a mouth full of pizza.

“It sounds like Sally wants one of his pieces of art,” I replied.

I organized what we knew so far in my head. Sally and Yohei Shinohara were fellow students. They were once close, but now they were estranged. Sally was currently struggling with a high-stakes project: the Vermeer and Meegeren exhibition. Despite being so busy, she had taken on students of her own—something that was very unlike her. Was it all a plan to use us to win over Yohei Shinohara, who had a soft spot for students, so that she could get a certain piece of art?

I tilted my head, feeling skeptical. There was also a word I was curious about. I wiped the pizza grease off my hands and picked up my phone.

When I searched for “Alderley,” there were countless results, ranging from people to store names. I added the word “Sotheby’s” to the search term and found the following:

“Sotheby’s was established in London on March 11, 1744, by Samuel Baker to

oversee the sale of several hundred valuable books from the library of Sir John Stanley Alderley. At the time, he auctioned the collection under his own name."

In other words, Sotheby's was originally founded to auction Sir Alderley's valuable books. In that case, what was the "Alderley" Sally was talking about?

"That aside," Chloe interrupted, placing her beer can on the table. "We really need to be thinking about the themed exhibit." There was a serious look in her eyes.

"Oh, right," Amelie and I replied.

"Let's discuss it while we eat," I suggested, taking out a pen and notebook. "We can start by saying whatever topics and ideas come to mind."

The others nodded and began expressing their opinions. Amelie still wanted an Art Nouveau exhibit revolving around the Mucha homage. On the other hand, Chloe was pushing for contemporary art. Personally, I still wanted to display the paintings with the ukiyo-e atmosphere.

When they began to talk about drawing lots, I raised my hand and said, "Um, what about combining the pieces we want to display?"

"Huh?" Their eyes widened at the thought of unifying Art Nouveau, contemporary art, and Japonism.

"Wouldn't it be chaotic?" asked Amelie.

"It'd be interesting if done well, though," said Chloe, her eyes sparkling.

"Yeah." I nodded. "I think these three have high compatibility."

Now excited, we brainstormed more ideas.

Rikyu, who had been observing quietly from the sofa, came over to the table with his laptop. "It sounds interesting, so I'll listen to your ideas and draw up a blueprint for you."

Just then, my phone rang. The call was from Takao Ishida, the freelance writer.

"Hello, Mashiro speaking," I said in Japanese.

"Hey, Aoi. I managed to get an appointment with the guy I was talking about.

Can you come to Brooklyn Bridge tomorrow afternoon?”

Our only plan for the next day was to go to the Brooklyn Museum in the morning. We were free to do whatever we wanted in the afternoon.

“Yes, I can.”

“I’ll send you the address. See you tomorrow.”

I thanked him and ended the call.

4

The next day, after seeing Brooklyn Museum, the second-largest museum in New York, we split up for the rest of the day. Amelie and Chloe said they’d be going to SoHo and Chinatown, while Rikyu and I crossed Brooklyn Bridge on our way to the meeting place.

“The view here is incredible too,” Rikyu said earnestly.

As its name suggested, Brooklyn Bridge connected Manhattan to Brooklyn. It was a suspension bridge spanning 1,825 meters with a beautiful, tasteful Gothic design. What’s more, the view of the East River and the Manhattan cityscape beyond it was, as Rikyu said, incredible.

“It really is amazing. I feel like that’s all I’ve been saying since coming to New York,” I murmured as we crossed the bridge.

“You need to work on your vocabulary.” Rikyu laughed. “Well, it *is* amazing.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. This city had an energy I’d never felt before.

The bridge connected to a neighborhood called Dumbo. Along the river, there was a green park and there were shops set up in warehouses. We were to meet Takao Ishida at a cafe that looked out at the Brooklyn Bridge.

The cafe was the type where you order at the cash register. Rikyu and I bought coffee and glanced around. Ishida was already inside. He waved when he saw us.

“Hello, Aoi. Oh, I didn’t think you’d bring such a cute girl with you.” Ishida

ogled Rikyu, who was standing next to me.

Today, Rikyu was wearing a cap and denim overalls. Despite wearing male fashion, he looked like a lovely boyish girl.

“I’m just tagging along, so I’ll be at the counter,” he said curtly, probably annoyed by the man’s leering. He sat down on a nearby counter stool.

“Is she shy? I like tomboys,” Ishida said with a laugh.

I gave a strained smile.

“Oh, sorry. You’re cute too, Aoi.”

There wasn’t any need to apologize whatsoever, so I shook my head and said, “It’s fine.”

“What’re you honor students up to now?”

“We’re visiting museums. Yesterday, we went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Sotheby’s. We also observed the preparations for Sally’s Vermeer and Meegeren exhibit.”

“Oh, being able to see that in advance is a nice perk.”

“Yes. There were ten works by each artist, and it was fascinating.”

As I spoke, I thought back on the exhibit we’d seen yesterday evening. It was full of famous paintings that I’d seen in textbooks, such as *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *The Milkmaid*, and *The Guitar Player*. Even the Meegeren forgeries had been famous ones like *Christ with the Adulteress* and *The Supper at Emmaus*.

“What did you think when you compared them?”

“I might’ve been fooled if I’d seen them at separate times, but when they were side by side, I could vaguely sense the difference.”

Ishida hummed with a smirk. “How were they different?”

“The depiction of light was different, as well as the overall ambience and feeling of the brushstrokes. Vermeer’s work was warm, while Meegeren’s gave off a sense of coldness. Oh, but I was surprised by *Woman Reading Music*. I thought that one might’ve been authentic. I hesitate to say this about a forgery, but I thought it was a brilliant work of art.”

Vermeer had a painting called *Woman Reading a Letter* that depicted a woman in blue standing and reading a letter. In *Woman Reading Music*, the woman was sitting and looking down at sheet music. The similarity made one think they could have been painted by the same artist.

Ishida hummed again, seeming intrigued.

“Um, is the person you were talking about here?” I asked, looking around the shop.

He shook his head. “He’s at Alderley right now.”

“Is Alderley a place?”

“That it is. By the way, do you have a guess as to what kind of place it is?” he asked as if challenging me.

Sotheby’s began as a place to sell Sir Alderley’s books. So this Alderley would be... “A place where items are collected before being displayed at Sotheby’s?”

Ishida gave a satisfied smile. “Close. It’s actually an auction house too, but it’s not as big as Sotheby’s, and it’s a members-only establishment that caters to rich people. It’s open today. Wanna go?”

“Can I get in without a membership?”

“It’ll be fine if I’m with you.”

Rikyu, having heard the conversation, turned around. “Can I go in too?” he asked with a big smile on his face.

“Of course. Each member is allowed two companions,” Ishida said, eyeing Rikyu. He seemed to have taken quite a liking to him. “Let’s get going, then. There’s been a lot of talk about a treasure that was brought in.” He quickly stood up and got ready to leave.

I stood up too. As I was returning the cup I’d used, Rikyu came up to me and sighed. “It’s a good thing I’m with you.”

“Yeah, thanks, Rikyu. I wouldn’t have been able to agree to go if you weren’t here.”

“That’s not the only thing. You’re so oblivious. That guy was leering at you a

lot at the party, you know? He definitely has ulterior motives.”

“Really? But he was fawning over you just now.”

“That’s why it’s a good thing that I’m with you.” Rikyu crossed his arms and muttered, “Kiyo’s never gonna be able to stop worrying.”

“Huh?” I replied, confused.

5

We took a taxi from Brooklyn Bridge and arrived at Alderley in less than ten minutes. It was a brick building that resembled the ones in Yokohama and Kobe’s warehouse districts, and it looked like it could be a restaurant or theater.

We opened the heavy door to find a reception desk and two security guards keeping a watchful eye on us. The entrance was farther inside.

Ishida showed his membership card to the receptionist and was given a box. Inside were entry badges and masks, lined up neatly.

“Masks?” I asked. They were flashy masks that went over the eyes, like what you’d see at an Italian carnival.

“There’s an event today. Pick whichever one you like,” Ishida explained, putting on the *Phantom of the Opera*-esque mask.

It felt like a masquerade ball. Rikyu and I looked at each other hesitantly. Suddenly, the door opened. We quickly picked up our masks and put them on before entering. The one I had grabbed in a hurry looked like bird wings, while Rikyu’s had a butterfly design.

The hall was a spacious atrium with chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling. There were several doors, passageways, and stairways leading farther inside.

“This way,” said Ishida, going down a passage leading to a downward staircase.

Lamps hung from the brick walls. It felt like we were descending into a dungeon. When we reached the bottom of the stairs, we found another hall, this one full of people. It appeared to be a gallery. Various items were on

display, including antique artwork, jewelry, watches, tin toys, and even gloves that had been worn by celebrities. All of them were rare, and most were very expensive.

I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

"Hey, Rikyu, the things here..." I whispered.

"Yeah." He nodded. "They must be stolen. Alderley is a place for things that can't be sold publicly."

"So they *are*..." I gulped.

"Also, he said we're only wearing masks because there's an event today, but I bet it's always like this." Rikyu put his hands on his hips, looking exasperated.

In other words, this was a members-only black market auction. We'd come to a terrifying place.

"Rikyu, sorry for making you come with me to such a scary place. Should we leave now?"

Just as I asked that, a masked man in a tuxedo appeared holding a microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, everyone who's forever in pursuit of the authentic, thank you for coming," he announced. "Let's get right to today's big item. If it's real, it's sure to make huge waves across the world! We have here today a first-rate curator who'll be appraising it for us, though I can't reveal her name."

A spotlight shone on a woman. Her mask covered her entire face, but it was obvious at a glance that it was Sally. The other guests probably knew that too, but the rules forbade revealing anyone's identity.

The masked Sally gave an exasperated shrug. "This happens every time. I wish you'd cut it out with the dramatics."

I heard chuckles around me.

"Don't say that," the man in the tuxedo said jokingly. "Now then, this is today's highlight."

A table gradually rose up in the center of the stage. There was a wooden box

on it. Sally slowly took out what was inside. The hall fell silent as the people around me watched her with bated breath.

A black tea bowl emerged from the box. The next instant, video footage of it appeared on displays in all directions. The inside of the tea bowl sparkled like the universe. The audience oohed and aahed, while I instinctively covered my mouth in shock.

“I can’t believe it,” I heard someone say through my translating device. “It’s yohen tenmoku.”

“There’re only supposed to be three of them in the world, aren’t there?” asked another.

Rikyu was stunned too. “This can’t be real, right?” he murmured.

Amidst the commotion, Sally also looked shaken. I thought back to what had happened at Kura a while back. *I was shaken too, but that tea bowl wasn’t—*

I ran up to Sally without thinking and shouted, “That’s a fake!”

Since it was on the spur of the moment, I had accidentally said it in Japanese. But Sally seemed to understand—and she realized who I was at the same time. She gave me a look of blatant suspicion.

She must be thinking, “How can you say that when you don’t know anything?”

I quickly added, “I recently saw something similar. A Japanese university was trying to scientifically reproduce yohen tenmoku tea bowls. Some of them went missing, and people were saying that they might’ve been stolen. That tea bowl is probably one of them, with years added to it.”

A tea bowl crafted with the earnest desire to reproduce a beautiful work of art had been stolen and maliciously tampered with. At this point, it was no longer an imitation but a lowly forgery.

Sally fell silent for a while. She looked down at the tea bowl and nodded. “Yes, this tea bowl was created through science,” she explained in English for the crowd. “It’s also been artificially aged. It’s a forgery. However, the tea bowl itself is an excellent reproduction of yohen tenmoku. It’s actually a shame that it went through a shoddy aging process.”

Everyone around us lamented the appraisal result.

“I’m disappointed too,” Sally said with a chuckle. Then she turned to me. “By the way, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, um...” I didn’t know what to say.

“Well, you don’t have to tell me.” She gave me a strained smile. “It’s taboo to ask about one’s circumstances and identity here. It’s good to be studious, but be careful. This is a place where anything and everything is a commodity.” She turned around and left the hall.

As I stood there, dumbfounded, Ishida came up and patted me on the shoulder. “Wow, I’m impressed. No wonder you’re one of her budding curators.”

“No, I shouldn’t have done that.”

The yohen tenmoku reproduction I’d seen at Kura had made me think it was real. That was why I had panicked just now: out of fear that Sally would appraise it as authentic. It meant I hadn’t trusted her.

“No, it’s good that you did. Anyway, the guy we’re here for is waiting for us in the guest room. Let’s go talk to him.”

“Oh, okay.”

Remembering the original purpose of our visit, I followed Ishida to the guest room.

6

The guest room was lined with European-style sofas facing each other. It was overwhelmingly luxurious, with a crystal chandelier, a mounted deer head, and a Chagall painting on the wall. Rikyu and I sat next to each other on the front side of the room, while Ishida and the “knowledgeable” person sat towards the back.

Ishida’s associate was a fat man who seemed Japanese like us, but since he was wearing a mask, I couldn’t be sure. At Alderley, asking someone’s name was taboo, as was offering your own name. So we didn’t introduce ourselves.

“Like the rumors say, Sally and Yohei Shinohara once dated,” the man said.

I had thought so too. It explained why Sally knew Japanese.

“But since they were pursuing the same path, it was complicated. Shinohara built up his career through hard work, but Sally was from a rich family and quickly rose to success in a privileged environment. Since they rivaled each other in ability, there was a lot of conflict between them.”

Jealousy towards someone’s talent and circumstances... I unconsciously bit my lip at the familiar feeling.

“One day, a painting was brought here to Alderley. Its authenticity couldn’t be determined through scientific analysis, so they had to have a curator appraise it. The request went to Yohei Shinohara. Well, since he was wearing a mask, no one could say for sure it was him. Anyway, he appraised the painting as authentic, but then Sally came along and declared, ‘No, this is a fake.’ The people there were confused by the two appraisals, but they decided to believe Sally. After that, the two of them were no longer on speaking terms.”

“So that’s what happened.” *That’s why Hopkins doesn’t know about this and the assistants can’t talk about it. It happened in a secret club where everyone was wearing masks.* “What kind of painting was it?” I asked.

The man smirked and laughed. “Oh, you still want to know more?”

As I was about to nod, Rikyu spoke up as if to stop me. “Hey, what do you mean by that?”

I looked at him in confusion.

“Is something going to happen if she asks another question?” he asked, glaring at the two men across from us. They chuckled.

“Yeah, that’s right. My intel costs five hundred thousand a pop. If you ask another question, you’ll be charged for it.”

I hadn’t expected this at all. My eyes darted around as I panicked.

“So can I answer your second question?” the man asked.

I hurriedly shook my head.

“Well then, since you only asked one question, that’ll be five hundred thousand yen.” He held out his hand.

“Wh-What? Why does that information cost money? And why is it *that* much?”

Ishida snickered. “Sally warned you just now, didn’t she? Everything here is a commodity. We didn’t tell you, but you didn’t ask beforehand either.”

“That’s not fair!” I exclaimed, leaning forward.

“Now, now,” the man said with a laugh. “There’s no need to worry. I know you don’t have the money.”

For a second, I was relieved, thinking I was just being teased by a mean adult.

“A proper Japanese lady fetches a high price. Especially a high-quality one. Many people saw your heroics earlier, so I’m sure there are plenty of rich people willing to pay a lot of money for a night with the two of you. I’ll give you guys a big cut too.”

“Yeah, if you wanna make it in this industry, you should make connections with those rich people. They might end up being your patrons in the future,” Ishida added.

The man reached out and tried to grab my wrist. Rikyu immediately kicked up the table between us, knocking the man back. I saw Ishida’s eyes widen from the corner of my eye.

“We’re leaving, Aoi,” said Rikyu, taking my hand. He tried to open the door, but it was locked.

“What should we do?” I was panicking.

“At times like this, Kiyo would do this,” he replied, slamming his heel down on the doorknob without hesitation. It broke and the door opened.

The broken door triggered a sensor, sending off alarms throughout the building. Rikyu and I weaved through the crowd of masked guests, sprinting down the corridor with all our might. We ran up the stairs and hurried for the exit.

“Catch those kids!” came a voice behind us.

Two guards were grinning and waiting for us at the exit. They were both brawny Americans.

“Haaah!” Rikyu shouted, grabbing a guard by the arm and throwing him over his shoulder. The man’s heavy build only made him hit the floor harder. He wouldn’t be moving for a while. The other guard gaped in disbelief, and Rikyu used that moment of distraction to elbow him in the solar plexus. He sank to the floor with a groan.

“C’mon, let’s go.”

“O-Okay.”

We darted outside and continued to run. It was already dark, and the Brooklyn Bridge was all lit up. After running for a while, we looked behind us. It didn’t seem like we were being chased, so we leaned against the wall of a building to catch our breath. Even Rikyu looked exhausted.

“Rikyu...thank you.”

It was all my fault. When I had heard that Alderley was a members-only auction house, I had imagined a world of VIPs, like the old shops in Kyoto that you couldn’t enter without a referral.

“It’s fine. You’re important to Kiyo, so it’s only natural that I’d protect you,” he said curtly, looking away.

I smiled at his usual aloofness. “Really, thank you. I’m so sorry.”

He shrugged. “You don’t have to apologize. But be more careful from now on, all right?”

“O-Okay.”

“Are you sure you understand? You’re good at appraising *things*, but you can’t identify bad people. No, that’s not it. You purposely don’t pick up on people’s bad intentions.”

My heart pounded at his direct accusation.

“In your mind, you want everyone to be good, so you only look at their good sides, right? And maybe that’s one of your positive traits. But there are times when you have to look at them properly, without averting your eyes. Ishida was

looking at you with dirty eyes. At first, I thought he had the usual ulterior motives, but now we know that he wanted to take advantage of you in any way he could.”

I looked at him without saying anything.

“I’m not saying you have to detect these things in everyone you meet. But if you’re going to work with someone, go somewhere with them, or entrust something to them, you have to carefully assess them before doing it.”

As Rikyu said, I tried not to see people’s bad intentions. Well, that wasn’t quite true. It was more that I’d learned not to let them bother me. The trigger was Holmes. I had fallen in love with all of him: the beautiful, the ugly, and the dark. So when I encountered the bad sides of people, I naturally started to let them slide.

Another factor had been Ensho. Even though I had been exposed to his most terrifying side, it had turned out that there was something pure lying dormant deep inside him. Seeing that had made me optimistically believe that there was beauty behind everything that was dark and evil.

I didn’t want to change my way of thinking, but if it was going to get me tricked, I’d have to start assessing people. Suddenly, I remembered Holmes’s words when Shiro Amamiya (now Kikukawa) had approached him with a business deal. On paper, it had been an attractive offer.

“I believe that when doing business, an idea is not good unless the partner is trustworthy.”

It wasn’t the conditions that were important, but whether you could place trust in the person. That applied to everything. Holmes had keener senses than his peers and picked up on all sorts of emotions, all while remaining dignified and making calm decisions. *I need to be like that too...*

A car drove up and stopped in front of us. The driver’s window opened, revealing Keiko’s face.

“Good grief. You never cease to amaze me.”

“Keiko!”

“Come on, get in. I’ll give you a ride.”

We nodded and got into the back seat. Keiko stepped on the gas, sighing in mild exasperation as she began to drive.

“You could’ve gotten yourself into a lot of trouble, you know?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, shrinking back.

“Were you there too?” Rikyu asked without a hint of shame.

Keiko paused before answering, “Yes, because I heard a rumor that a yohen tenmoku tea bowl was going to be put up for auction. Otherwise, I’d never go to such a shady place.”

She seemed eager to give an excuse. I’d wondered if places like that were a standard part of the industry, but it seemed that even curators recognized it as a bad place.

“Why would Sally do an appraisal at a place like that?”

“There are two reasons a curator would hide their face and appraise there. One, money. Two, connections. Sally’s after the latter. At those kinds of members-only secret clubs, you can get close to wealthy people. More importantly, what were you two doing there? How did you even get inside?”

I shamefully told her what had happened, from Hopkins’s request to Takao Ishida’s trickery.

“Ahh.” She placed her hand on her forehead. “Ishida’s a phony. Even his ‘freelance writer’ title is fake. Don’t trust him just because he’s Japanese.”

“Yeah.” I hung my head. Perhaps Ishida had thought I’d be an easy target since I’d brought up Alderley. I felt so bad that I couldn’t even speak.

“Well, think of it as a learning experience,” said Rikyu. “Hey, Keiko, are they gonna keep chasing us?”

“Don’t worry. As long as we don’t do anything, they won’t relentlessly pursue us. They don’t want to draw attention to their secret club.”

I looked out the window, relieved. We crossed Brooklyn Bridge and continued north. We’d probably be in SoHo soon.

We happened to pass by the Japanese umbrella shop owned by Haruka's dad. The solitary store that clashed with the rest of New York looked fantastical with its lights on.

Eventually, we passed through Times Square, the most famous part of Manhattan where the New Year's countdown was held. The neon advertisements made a strong impact, but they didn't feel tacky. People walked happily through the bustling streets that were shrouded in a sea of lights. Despite it being one of the biggest cities in the world, the atmosphere was rather relaxed. There was no sense of restlessness. It felt like people were very nice to outsiders, perhaps because it was a hub for immigrants. It was a one-of-a-kind city.

"New York really is a great place," I murmured as I gazed out the window.

Rikyu gave a mildly exasperated shrug. "Did you already forget what just happened?"

I grimaced. "Well, there are scary and bad places all over the world, even in Japan. It was just stupid of me to go there. It doesn't change the fact that New York is great."

"Man," he said, scratching his head, "you never stop being you, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm impressed that you always look for the good parts of people and places."

"Huh?" I blinked. *It's not like people usually go out of their way to look for bad things.*

"But in that sense, you're similar to Kiyo," he muttered to himself, resting his chin on his hand.

Indeed, Holmes did always seem moved by everything he saw or touched. "It's lovely," "It's wonderful," and "It's beautiful" were his most common phrases. Even in situations that would make me recoil, he would find something positive to rejoice over. If he had been in the car just then, he would have been the happiest of us all.

"I don't match up to Holmes," I said.

Keiko burst out laughing at that. Rikyu laughed in amusement too. I joined them, but suddenly, I found myself wanting to hear Holmes's voice. Thinking about it, I hadn't called him once since my arrival, partly because it was so hectic and partly because of the time difference.

After Keiko dropped us off at Sally's parents' house, I only said a quick hello to Chloe and Amelie before taking a shower and retiring to my room. I sat on the bed and checked the time. It was morning in Shanghai.

I nervously called Holmes, and he picked up almost immediately after I hit the button.

"Aoi!" There was excitement in his voice.

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to call you until now, Holmes."

"Don't worry about it. Oh right, sorry. I picked up the phone without thinking. I'll call you back." He hung up and called me back. "I'm glad you seem to be doing well, Aoi."

"Yes, I'm fine. Sorry, it's just been so hectic. I'm actually staying at Sally's parents' house right now with the other students."

"Oh, that's right. Speaking of which, how is the jet lag?"

"Now that you mention it..." I thought back. "I seem to be fine."

"That's good."

My heart was racing since I hadn't heard his voice in a while.

"So what have you been doing? Touring museums with Sally and having discussions in her salon?"

I couldn't help but laugh, which seemed to confuse him. "It's not what I expected. When we met Sally, she immediately gave us a test." I giggled as I explained everything that had happened so far.

"It's not what you signed up for, but it sounds like fun," he said, seeming intrigued.

"It is. Have things been going well on your end?"

“Yes. There was a bit of trouble, but things are fine.”

“Trouble?”

“Ensho said, ‘I’ve had enough. I can’t become an appraiser,’ and ran away.”

“What?!” My eyes widened. “D-Did he go back to Japan?”

“No, he came back after calming down a bit. But it looks like he really has given up on becoming an appraiser.”

A bitter feeling welled up within me. Ensho had surely headed to Shanghai full of enthusiasm, thinking it’d be a step forward in his career. But instead, he may have been forced to see the difference in ability between Holmes and himself, making him aware of his own limits. If that was the case, then I knew painfully well how he felt.

As I fell silent, Holmes asked, “By the way, have there been any changes on your end? Have you ever felt like you were in danger?”

My heart skipped a beat. Just today, I had inadvertently entered a secret club and put myself in danger. However, I decided not to tell him about it for now. Not because I wanted to keep it a secret but because I knew he would be overly concerned.

“I think New York is a lot safer these days, but it’s still rowdy at times,” he continued.

So that’s what he meant. I placed a hand on my chest. “No, I’ve been fine. Before coming here, I thought it’d be more dangerous, but it’s surprisingly laid-back for a city.”

“Ah, I know what you mean. In Tokyo and Osaka, everyone feels like they’re in a hurry.”

“Right. Oh, and Rikyu accompanied me everywhere I went. He’s been acting as my bodyguard.”

“Oh, Rikyu did that? Sorry, please let him stick around, then.”

“You say that as if he wants to follow me. I actually feel bad for him.” As I spoke, I noticed the clock from the corner of my eye. I’d be inconveniencing Holmes if the call went on too long. “I’m going to get some rest before

tomorrow. There's a lot of work that needs to be done."

"Yes, do your best. Good night," he whispered, ending the call.

I was glad that I'd gotten to hear his voice. My heart was racing the whole time. I laid down in bed, pressed my face against the pillow, and closed my eyes.

[5] The Truth Between Him and Her

1

Having completed our museum tours, we put together a proposal and submitted it. We wanted to give it to Sally directly and get her feedback, but since she was busy, we had to submit it through one of her assistants. Sally gave us the green light right away, and we got to work.

“There isn’t much time before the opening. It’s going to get busy. There’s going to be an unveiling party for industry and press the night before, so be prepared for that,” Keiko and the other assistants warned us.

“Yes.” Chloe, Amelie, and I nodded.

We were in a hall on the top floor of a building. This was going to be the exhibition venue, and we had been given twenty square meters—about twelve tatami mats—to work with.

Although we were producing our own themed exhibit, it was completely different from putting together an exhibit for a school festival. The work was all done by specialized professionals based on our written proposal. Of course, we wouldn’t want it to differ from what we had in mind, so we supervised them and gave instructions.

The artwork was brought in and the exhibit was put together according to the blueprint. All that was left to do was to make our own adjustments, but that was the hard part. Expressing one’s vision was difficult. The three of us each had our own thoughts and opinions. Because of that, we decided that we would each have the final say for the field of art we chose. The art students joined us in spending all day working in the hall. The more we worked, the harder it was to tell what looked good.

After making some progress, we decided to take a break.

“I’m going to get some fresh air,” said Amelie.

“I’m going to the first-floor cafe,” added Chloe.

They both left the hall. Now alone, I looked at our exhibit and hummed.

“Aoi, your neck’s gonna break if you tilt your head that much. What’s wrong?”

I looked in the direction of the voice and saw Rikyu holding two cups of coffee and grinning.

“It’s lovely, but how do I put this...” I mused.

“Do you think it lacks impact?” he asked, handing me a coffee and sitting down on a folding chair.

“Yeah.” I nodded and sat down too. “I don’t think it’s bad, but I want something a bit more eye-catching.”

“Yeah, I get it. It’d be nice to have a little something extra.”

“Right? For example, when I was looking at the streets of Manhattan from Keiko’s car, I saw—oh!” I stood up.

Rikyu looked up, startled. “Huh? What happened?”

“Yes, that would be great! Rikyu, I have a favor to ask.”

Before I could elaborate, someone called out to me from behind, “Hey, I see you’re hard at work.” It was Hopkins. “Thank you for your report, Aoi.”

I had told him the results of our investigation over the phone: that Yohei Shinohara had once appraised an item as genuine at the members-only auction house Alderley, Sally had overridden his appraisal and called it a forgery, and they had been estranged ever since. Hopkins had merely thanked me before ending the call.

“And please allow me to apologize,” he continued.

“Apologize?”

“My careless request sent you to a dangerous place. During the call, I was so shocked that I forgot to say sorry,” he said apologetically.

I shook my head. “I did that on my own.”

“Still, I feel guilty. The story makes sense, though. I hate places like Alderley

because I think they encourage theft. My students know that, so they wouldn't have been able to tell me what happened."

I nodded silently.

"By the way, Aoi, do you know the story behind the painting *Christ and the Adulteress*?"

"Yes," I replied. "That was the Vermeer forgery that Meegeren sold to a Nazi official, right?"

"Correct. At the time, the Nazis were collecting treasures from around the world, not unlike Japan during the bubble period."

I slumped my shoulders, feeling ashamed.

"It's not a bad thing. Wealthy countries will purchase art, and by doing so, the art is protected. Think of it as a law of nature," he said with a laugh. "The story goes that after the war, the Nazi treasures were sold in both public and black markets, and over time, they made their way to bubble-era Japan. But then the bubble burst, and the art that had been temporarily collected in Japan went overseas in the blink of an eye."

I listened attentively to his words, not saying anything.

"I know that shortly after Japan's bubble burst, many people were talking about a certain artwork that had been put on display at Alderley. It was supposedly a Vermeer-esque painting, and scientific analysis had failed to determine whether it was by Vermeer or Meegeren."

"Then that was the item Shinohara appraised?"

"Most likely." Hopkins nodded.

Branded a forgery, the painting's value would have been reduced to zero at the time. But if Shinohara believed it was real, he very well could have taken it for himself. The problematic piece was surely in his possession. And now, about twenty-five years later, Sally wanted to borrow it. A painting where scientific analysis couldn't determine if it was by Vermeer or Meegeren would be the perfect centerpiece for an exhibition dedicated to the two. However, Shinohara didn't want to lend it to her.

Having grasped the situation, I nodded in understanding. There was only one thing on my mind now: “I want to see that painting too...”

“Indeed.” Hopkins folded his arms. “Oh, I know. Yohei is giving a lecture at an art school tomorrow afternoon. Why don’t you attend? I’ll ask them for permission and put in a good word for you.”

“Umm...” I looked at the exhibit hall. *It’s almost ready, so it might be okay for me to slip out in the afternoon.* “Where is it?”

“SoHo.”

“I’d love to, then.”

As soon as I heard the location, I agreed to go. I had been meaning to go to SoHo again.

2

With preparations ninety percent complete, we decided to split up the next day to find ways to make the exhibit better. Rikyu and I headed to SoHo in the morning.

As I stood in the subway car, swaying as I stared absentmindedly at the advertisements, Rikyu asked, “Hey, the lecture isn’t until the afternoon, right? Are you planning on walking around SoHo until then?”

“No, I want to go to Haruka’s shop again.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I have business there.”

“You’re not trying to meddle, are you?” He glared at me.

“No, I won’t bother you guys. I have business with the store.”

“The store?”

The train arrived at the station. We went above ground and headed for the Japanese umbrella store.

I thought this when we first came here, but SoHo itself is like a work of art.

Old-fashioned buildings, colorful signs, a giant sculpture of a black cat...even the family-oriented fashion brands I often saw in Japan looked like different stores here. The Japanese umbrella store didn't fit in, but seeing it again made me think it stood out in a good way.

"Hello," I said as I entered the shop.

The owner and Haruka looked at me in surprise.

"Welcome...Aoi, wasn't it?"

"Umm, are you by yourself?"

I was about to say, "No, I'm with Rikyu," but I noticed he was no longer next to me. I craned my neck to look outside and saw him leaning against the wall, arms crossed. Apparently, he really didn't want to see Haruka. *And yet he came with me anyway out of concern for my safety.* Feeling bad for him, I didn't tell Haruka that he was standing outside.

"Um, I'm here with a request," I said, getting to the point.

"A request?" They tilted their heads in curiosity.

I explained my situation to them: that I was training short-term under a curator, that I'd been tasked with producing an exhibit, and that it was going to be a combination of modern art, Art Nouveau, and Japonism.

"I was hoping to use Japanese umbrellas as part of the presentation. We still have a bit of budget left, so I'd like to buy a few, but I can't afford that many. So I was wondering if I could borrow some of the ones that are just for display." I had gotten Chloe and Amelie's approval for this.

Haruka and the store owner wordlessly exchanged looks. Then, their faces lit up.

"W-We'd love that, Aoi!"

"Yes, we'd be happy to help. By all means, please use our umbrellas."

"Yeah, it'll be a good advertisement for us, so pick any of the ones we have here."

"We also have some other designs in the back room, like cherry blossoms."

I smiled as they raced to accommodate me. “Thank you. Can you show me what you have?”

“Yes!” Haruka nodded and brought over a thick catalog. I stood next to her and looked through the designs. Cherry blossoms, hydrangeas, fall leaves, arabesque, colored rings... They were all beautiful, and I sighed in admiration.

As I stuck sticky notes on the catalog, imagining where I would display each one, Haruka murmured, “I’m glad Rikyu’s girlfriend is someone like you.”

“Huh?” I looked at her. She was smiling, but her cheeks were flushed and there were tears in her eyes.

“I mean, um, Rikyu and I are childhood friends, and a long time ago, we even promised to marry each other; that’s how close we were. We were together a lot, so people often mistook us for a couple. But they’d always say things like ‘They don’t suit each other’ or ‘Why is he with a dude-looking girl like that?’ So I always felt bad for him.” She laughed in an attempt to hide her tears. “Rikyu’s always been popular with girls, but he never got into a serious relationship. This is actually the first time he’s introduced a girlfriend to me. I’ve always wondered what kind of girl he’d end up with. I also thought that if he got a girlfriend, she’d definitely hate me because I’m his childhood friend, which means I’m in the way. But you’re not like that at all, Aoi. You’re a really good person, so I’m relieved.”

“Um,” I said, interrupting her rapid-fire speech.

“Oh, sorry for saying all of this. It bothers you that we promised to get married, right? But that was just a silly thing between kids, so—”

“Haruka!” I shouted. She looked at me timidly, as if afraid of what I was going to say. “I’m not Rikyu’s girlfriend.”

“Huh?” She blinked. “But Rikyu said you were.”

“Um, I’m not *his* girlfriend. I’m going out with Holmes, as in, Kiyotaka,” I said, fidgeting and blushing out of embarrassment.

Haruka froze. Her round eyes became like circles. After a pause, she exclaimed, “What?! Then why did he introduce you as his girlfriend?”

“He called me ‘the girlfriend’ he told you about...”

“Oh, so that was supposed to mean *Kiyo’s* girlfriend.” She face-palmed, and I felt like I could see the spirals in her eyes.

Rikyu came inside, looking exasperated. He must’ve heard Haruka’s voice from outside.

“Rikyu...”

“Idiot.”

“What do you mean, ‘idiot’?!”

“Stop jumping to conclusions,” Rikyu said bluntly, crossing his arms.

“Anyone would’ve made that assumption!”

“Then all you had to do was ask to make sure.”

“Yeah, but I was already convinced at that point. But you know, the thought that you finally got a girlfriend made me kind of relieved. I feel bad every time someone mistakes us for a couple.”

“Argh! It’s happening again. You’re such a pain when you get like that. It’s seriously annoying.”

“Huh?!”

“Whenever someone thinks we’re a couple, you deny it with all your might. All you ever say is ‘Someone like me wouldn’t be a good match for Rikyu’ or ‘Rikyu would be better off with a prettier girl.’ And whenever you see me with another girl, you get shocked like what happened this time. It’s the same pattern every single time. Can you stop it already? It’s so annoying,” Rikyu spat out.

Haruka froze, lost for words.

“Rikyu, that was mean,” I said.

“You be quiet, Aoi,” he snapped back immediately.

“Okay.” I shut my mouth.

“What do *you* want to do about this, Haruka?”

Haruka clammed up and looked down. I felt like I knew how she was feeling. She liked Rikyu, but she couldn't make a move because she was convinced that she wasn't good enough for him. At the same time, she couldn't just give up, so it hurt to see him with other girls.

"You know, I never thought of our promise as a 'silly thing between kids,'" Rikyu added.

"Huh?" Haruka looked up, bewildered.

"I always thought I was gonna marry you when we grew up. That's why I never went out with anyone who confessed to me. My top priority is Kiyo, but I always prioritized you over other girls. But you're always running away. I even came all the way to New York to see you, but you're still saying the same things. What am I supposed to do? Do you really think I should go out with someone else?"

Haruka was stunned. Perfectly understandable, seeing as how the store owner and I were also too shocked to say anything.

"B-But you have high standards for girls, don't you? You get mad whenever you see someone trying to get close to Kiyo, saying they're no good or they don't suit him at all."

I agreed with her. I had also thought that Rikyu had impossibly high standards.

"That's because it's Kiyo," he replied. "It's different for me."

I had a feeling we were all thinking the same thing: *Really?*

"I'm not that great of a guy. First of all, I'm short. I'm strong but I don't have much stamina, and I have a girly face. If I were a girl, I wouldn't want to date a guy like me. I always think the girls who confess to me have weird tastes."

Oh...so his overly strict assessments were only because it was Holmes.

"So tell me how you really feel," he continued, looking Haruka straight in the eye. "No running away or changing the subject. I'm tired of that annoying stuff."

Haruka cast her eyes down, unable to look directly at his face. "I've...always liked you, ever since we were kids. Even now. I wanted to go to the same middle school as you, but I failed the entrance exam. I thought I could go to the

same high school as you if I worked hard, so I studied like crazy. If I got in, I was going to confess to you. Then, I passed the entrance exam, but when I went to find you, people called us ‘a pretty boy and an ape’...” Tears spilled down her face.

“Jeez, I wish you’d be like Aoi and have a backbone.”

“Me?” I pointed at myself.

“I told Aoi a million times that she wasn’t good enough for Kiyo, but my bullying didn’t even faze her.”

I gave an awkward smile. It wasn’t so much that I’d been unfazed. It was more that I’d completely agreed. I’d known better than anyone else that I wasn’t good enough for Holmes. He’d felt so far away at the time.

“You know, I’ve never thought that we didn’t suit each other,” Rikyu continued. “But even if someone said that about us, in the end, that’s not what relationships are about. Seeing Kiyo and Aoi taught me that.”

Haruka clenched her eyes shut. “I love you, Rikyu,” she said as if mustering all of her courage.

Rikyu smiled, walked up to her, and gave her a tight hug. “I know. Well done.” He grinned and patted her head as she cried.

The store owner and I watched them fondly from a distance.

3

In the afternoon, Rikyu and I went to the art school in SoHo where Yohei Shinohara was to have his lecture. Hopkins had sorted everything out for us, so all we had to do was give our names at reception to be granted entry.

The classroom felt similar to a prep school, with long white tables and a whiteboard at the front. The students were already seated. We sat in the very back.

“America really is a melting pot of races, huh?” Rikyu murmured as he looked at the students.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “When there are so many different kinds of people, that becomes the norm.”

For example, if I saw a foreigner with bold tattoos in Japan, I would unconsciously feel apprehensive, but I didn’t think anything in particular when I saw people like that in New York. Since it was normal to see people with flashy tattoos here, they no longer unsettled me.

Japan really does feel like a closed-off island nation. It’s not a good or bad thing, but rather, you could say that because it’s so small, it needed to protect its own culture in order to preserve the good things about the country. Maybe Japan’s unique nature is like a really strong white blood cell, and the culture it’s been defending with all its might is especially prevalent in today’s Kyoto. A heart that appreciates the fleeting, delicate beauty of the four seasons, not to mention wabi-sabi... I feel like I understand them more after leaving the country.

A little while later, Shinohara entered the classroom, greeted us, and began his lecture. Using a PowerPoint presentation, he talked about museums and art galleries around the world and how art has changed over the years. It was very interesting and educational.

He also spoke about himself. His father had been an executive at a large company, and he had grown up in America. Both of his parents had been art collectors, and because of that, he had taken an interest in art as well. But when the bubble burst, his father’s company went bankrupt, and he lost everything he had taken for granted. It had been incredibly difficult to climb back up, and he hoped that the financially struggling people of today would also continue to work hard.

After the lecture, the students left the classroom, saying goodbye to Shinohara. Before long, it was only him, Rikyu, and me left.

He looked in our direction as if he had been waiting for this moment. “I was surprised when Hopkins said you wanted to attend my class. You’re acquainted with him?” he asked as he gathered the teaching materials on the podium.

“Not exactly, but my teacher is,” I replied, quietly walking up to him.

“Oh? Who’s your teacher?”

“Kiyotaka Yagashira.”

“Ah.” He laughed. “Seiji’s talented and handsome grandson. So, he’s your teacher. Are you sure you didn’t mean ‘boyfriend’?” he asked teasingly.

I nodded and admitted that Kiyotaka was my boyfriend.

Shinohara immediately looked annoyed. “So that’s how you got an in with Hopkins.”

His response left a bitter taste in my mouth. It was as if he wanted to say, “Women have it easy.” Amelie had said, “I can’t believe Yohei Shinohara would say such a thing” in response to the drama around Sally, but I could sense the resentment in his heart.

“You said to Sally that ‘we don’t need women in this world,’ right?” I asked. His hands stopped moving. “Why would you say such a thing?”

He gave a dry smile. “That quote is missing some words. What I said was, ‘I’m sick of people who have no skill and try to use seduction to succeed at their work. We don’t need women like that in this world,’” he replied as he erased the whiteboard.

“Did Sally try to seduce you?”

“No, it was her chief assistant. She was trying to get me to accept a request. The next time I saw Sally, I criticized her, and she argued that she hadn’t told her assistant to do that. Then I said, ‘You only care about socializing with the upper class. You see your assistants as mere pawns, and you don’t care about training young curators. Leaders like you don’t contribute to society.’ I assume that’s why she came up with the honor student program out of desperation. Ha ha!”

The assistant’s request must’ve been to lend her that painting. Sally had instructed her to acquire Yohei Shinohara’s painting for her exhibit, no matter what it took. The assistant presumably would have asked normally at first, but since Shinohara had adamantly refused to lend it out, she may have had no choice left but to resort to seduction tactics. Then, Sally was shocked by Shinohara’s criticism and created the honor student program, wanting to prove that she *did* care about training successors.

I nodded, understanding what had transpired thus far.

“So, Sally sent you this time?” Shinohara asked, looking at me.

“I came here of my own free will. Not for the sake of the exhibit, but because I really want to see it for myself.”

“See what?”

“The painting you own that might be by Vermeer.”

His eyes widened in surprise. “How do you know about that?”

“Hopkins asked me to find out why his students are fighting, because it pains him to see. So I investigated and found out that twenty-five years ago, you appraised a possible Vermeer painting at Alderley. You said it was real, but Sally said it was fake, right?”

He laughed with a grimace. “Yes. You’ve done your research.”

“Do you still think that painting is authentic?”

He chuckled and nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“I’d like to see it too. Not because of Sally. I really just want to see it,” I said, looking him in the eye.

He heaved a sigh and returned my gaze. “I wouldn’t mind showing you if you weren’t a girl with no real skill, who only came this far because of her boyfriend.”

“Oh.” I looked down.

Rikyu, who was standing by the wall, began to argue in my defense, but I shook my head and stopped him. The other day, during Sally’s test, Keiko had praised me. But after confirming that I was still Holmes’s apprentice, she had said, “He knows what he’s doing, huh?” At the time, I had felt bitter because it felt like everything I had was given to me by Holmes. But now I understood: *I’m here because Holmes taught me.*

“Before I met him, I didn’t know anything about art. Because of him, I was able to encounter many works of art and discover their beauty. He brought me to various places, and through him, I was able to meet many people. So it’s

thanks to him that I'm here right now. It's true that I came this far because of him. I won't ask you to show me the painting anymore," I said, bowing.

"Hold on." Shinohara turned off the lights, started up his laptop, and opened a PowerPoint presentation. The screen showed two Chinese porcelain jars side by side. "I used these for a recent lecture. Both of them are blue and white porcelain from China. Do you know what time periods they're from?"

Both jars had a white base covered in blue flowers. I stared closely at them. "The right one is from the Ming dynasty, and the left one is from the Yuan dynasty."

"That was fast." He laughed.

"I thought it'd be hard since they're pictures, but these pieces are easy to identify. They make for good teaching material."

It was difficult to tell the difference between blue and white pottery from the Yuan dynasty (thirteenth century) and the Ming dynasty (fourteenth century). There were several distinguishing elements, mainly to do with the style of the patterns and the overall atmosphere. Most pieces from the Yuan dynasty were painted with hard, sharp angles. The lines were thin but strong and elaborate. On the other hand, pieces from the Ming dynasty had slightly thicker and softer lines. There was more empty space and they had an elegant, refined atmosphere. That said, there were always exceptions. In reality, many of the differentiating aspects couldn't be explained in words. Holmes had said there was no choice but to look at them many times and get a feel for them.

Shinohara said nothing and clicked the mouse. The next piece displayed was a jar with a handle and lid. The spiraling lines of the raimon pattern were connected precisely and consistently, while the flowers and stems were like intricate embroidery. It was a perfectly symmetrical design. There was a lion painted on the top of the lid.

"It's beautiful," I said passionately. "This is blue and white porcelain from the Qing dynasty, right?"

His expression relaxed into a bit of a smile. The next piece was a reddish-brown glass vase. It was decorated in a way that made me think of a mythical world.

“Sorry, I don’t know this one.”

“It’s the work of a French designer named René Lalique.”

“I haven’t seen much glassware, so I don’t know enough about it.”

“Glassware is wonderful too, so you should look at it more from now on.”

“Yes, it’s beautiful and I love it. I want to study it further going forward.”

Right after I said that, a painting appeared on the screen. It looked like Vermeer. It depicted the woman from Vermeer’s *Woman Reading a Letter* and Meegeren’s *Woman Reading Music*. The composition was roughly the same as *Woman Reading Music*, with her sitting on a chair, but her hands were resting on the table, folded, and she was looking up as if basking in the light from the window. The light’s atmosphere made me think it could’ve been painted by Vermeer himself, but the brushstrokes made it look like it could be a continuation of *Woman Reading Music* as well.

Could Meegeren have based Woman Reading Music on this painting? But it looks like... I gulped.

“What do you think?” Shinohara asked.

I couldn’t answer him right away. After some thought, I replied, “I...don’t know.” I couldn’t determine whether it was by Vermeer or Meegeren.

“I see,” he said with a self-deprecating laugh. “I still believe it’s real. It certainly wouldn’t be strange if it were. Sally should’ve felt the same way.” He gave a bitter frown. From the look of it, he still couldn’t accept Sally’s appraisal. Perhaps he thought that she had given the opposite opinion in order to get in his way.

“Shinohara, when I see this painting, it makes me wonder if...”

“Hm?” He turned to me.

“Sally didn’t sabotage you. She protected you, didn’t she?”

His eyes widened in shock. “Excuse me?” He looked down at me with a tense expression. “What do you mean by that?”

“If it’s true, I think you would know the reason best.”

He fell silent. After a while, he put a hand over his mouth. Apparently, he'd never considered that Sally might have appraised that painting as a forgery in order to protect him. It was clear that he was greatly shocked by the possibility.

I should leave now.

Rikyu and I thanked him, bowed, and left the classroom.

The evening sun was shining through the hallway windows. As we leisurely walked down the corridor, Rikyu said from behind me, "Hey, Aoi..."

"Yeah?" I turned around.

"I heard from mom that you wanna study abroad. Is that true?"

The straightforward question made my heart beat faster. I didn't know how to respond.

"If you do, I'll help you convince Kiyo, okay?"

I paused, confused as to why he would say such a thing. Suddenly, I remembered what he had said to Haruka and giggled. "Because I'm not good enough for Holmes, so you want us to separate?"

"That's not it." He pouted. "Seeing you and Kiyo made me think that even if two people don't suit each other at first, spending time together can turn them into a good match."

My eyes widened at his blunt reply.

"You're not married, so you should move around on your own while you still can. I feel bad for my mom because if it wasn't for me, I'm sure she would've traveled around the world and done a lot more things while she was young. If being apart from Kiyo ruins your relationship, then it wasn't that strong to begin with, right?"

I gave a vague nod and looked out the window. The buildings of Manhattan towered in the orange sky.

[6] Surprise

1

The honor students had finished their preparations, and all that was left to do was wait for the exhibition to open the next day. The night before, a preopening party was being held in the exhibit hall. Although it was called a party, there wasn't any real food served, only drinks like champagne and wine and snacks to go with them. It was really just an event for industry people to enjoy the exhibition in advance.

The art students and guests looked satisfied, but one of Sally's assistants—Keiko Fujiwara—was frantically looking around.

"Oh, for crying out loud! Where did those girls go?" The stars of the party—the three honor students—were nowhere in sight. "And when is Sally going to get here?" she muttered, looking at the clock.

Her boss's focus was on the Vermeer exhibition, which kept her so busy that she had barely involved herself with the students' exhibit at all. When the honor students had submitted their proposal, she'd merely skimmed it and said, "It looks fine to me." She had never once shown up at the venue. However, if she didn't appear at the preopening party, she would be setting a bad example as an organizer. A party without Sally or the honor students would be like a wedding without a bride.

Keiko made her way through the crowd, searching for Aoi, Amelie, and Chloe. She did find Rikyu, who had switched from the unisex style he'd been sporting thus far to something more masculine. He was wearing a suit and his longish hair was tied back in a ponytail. Unlike before, he now looked like a gallant, beautiful young man.

"Looking handsome," Keiko remarked. "When you dress like that, you suddenly seem manly."

"Thanks," Rikyu said with a laugh.

Next to him were his mother, Yoshie, and a short-haired girl wearing a dress. The girl had clear eyes and seemed like the cheerful type. Upon closer inspection, she and Rikyu were holding hands.

“Oh, wow. Is she your girlfriend?” Keiko asked.

“Yeah. Her name’s Haruka,” he replied proudly.

The girl bowed shyly. “I’m Haruka Ichinose. Thank you very much for using our umbrellas for this exhibit.”

“Oh, she’s from the umbrella store that the girls incorporated in the—” Keiko’s eyes widened as she remembered her original goal. “Right, Rikyu, where did those girls go? I’m sure I brought them here, but I can’t find them.”

“About that...” He put his hands on his hips. “As soon as we entered the hall, Amelie said she was gonna throw up from anxiety, and the other two went with her. I think they’re in the waiting room.”

The three students had only worked on the exhibit for a short period of time, but they had given it their all. They had said they’d done all they could, but from the sound of it, the thought of visitors seeing their work had made at least one of them unbearably nervous.

“The waiting room...” Just as Keiko was about to go get them, Sally and her chief assistant arrived. “Oh! Rikyu, sorry, but go get them for me!” She hurried over to Sally. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“You must’ve been busy. Where are the honor students?” Sally asked in her usual curt tone as she walked.

“They’re on their way. By the way, how’s the Vermeer exhibition going?”

“Well, we’ve done what we could. There was a piece I really wanted to display, but it’s proving to be difficult. So, where’s the exhibit those girls made?” She scanned the hall.

“This way.” Keiko led her to the themed exhibit.

“Their proposal wasn’t bad. Did you write it?”

“No, they did it by themselves. None of the assistants touched it.”

“Oh, is that so?”

It was clear that Sally only thought of the honor students as a billboard and wasn't expecting anything great from them. It frustrated Keiko, who had watched the girls' struggle.

Well, let's have her see it first, she thought, stopping in front of the exhibit.

2

While Keiko was with Sally...

We honor students were hanging our heads in the waiting room. Up until the last minute, we had been confident that we'd done a great job, but once it came time for guests to see our work, we suddenly got cold feet. Amelie had said she felt like throwing up, so we had gone to the waiting room to look after her, and now we found ourselves rooted in place.

“We need to go soon,” I said.

“I know.” Amelie was pouting.

Chloe heaved a sigh and leaned back in her chair. “I get how you feel, Amelie. Since we're Sally's chosen students, people have high expectations of us. The guests are probably judging our exhibit very strictly right this moment,” she murmured.

“Wait, saying that will just make her feel worse!”

Sure enough, Amelie covered her mouth with her hands, her face white as a ghost. “Sorry, just give me a little more time.”

Chloe and I closed our mouths. The room fell silent. Then, there was a knock on the door, followed by Rikyu's voice.

“Keiko's calling for you guys. It looks like Sally's here.”

The mention of Sally's name was like an electric shock. We immediately stood up. I gathered my courage and straightened my expression, trying to switch gears as I left the waiting room.

We walked quickly to the exhibit hall and found that it was already crowded

with guests. They were holding drinks and enjoying the art, saying things like “I heard that all of them are by art college students” and “Their youthful sense of aesthetics is wonderful.” Most of them seemed to be art students or people involved with the sponsoring company. As we headed over to our exhibit, I was relieved to see that everyone seemed happy.

“Wow, what a crowd,” Amelie remarked.

Our exhibit was busier than the rest of the hall. It seemed that Sally had just finished looking at it, so we nervously stood in a row just outside, our faces tense.

Sally came up to us and said, “That was a selection of artwork by the three students I was most interested in out of the ones I’ve had my eye on. I expected you to choose one of them, so I was very surprised that you decided to showcase all three.” She giggled and turned around to look at the exhibit. “Contemporary art, Art Nouveau, Japonism... The three genres seem completely different at first glance, but they influence each other and are connected. You’ve shown that beautifully. And the Japanese umbrellas were especially good.”

We had used Japanese umbrellas from Haruka’s dad’s store as props to enhance the exhibit. First, we had removed the handles and set some of the umbrellas on the floor as footlights to welcome the visitors. Others had been hung from the ceiling as pendant lights. Seeing the faintly lit Japanese umbrella store from the window of Keiko’s car had reminded me of a store I had recently seen in Kyoto that used umbrellas as lighting. I had decided to incorporate it into the exhibit. There were also umbrellas hung on the wall as props representing the four seasons with their patterns.

“Once you step in, it feels like you’re in another world. The guests loved the excitement. It also smelled rather nice.”

“Yes.” I nodded. “I happened to have brought some nice incense from Japan, so I burned it here.” It was supposed to be a souvenir for Sally, but I hadn’t had a chance to give it to her. It had later occurred to me that I could use it for the exhibit.

“I see. To be honest, I didn’t expect you three to make something this good.”

She gazed at the exhibit and her expression relaxed into a smile. “Both the guests and the sponsor love it. It’s also been a real inspiration for me. Thank you for doing a great job.”

Tears welled up in our eyes. It had only been a short time, but that was precisely why we had put so much into it.

It’s finally done. The job isn’t finished when the exhibit is completed, but at this moment—when people see it.

The three of us cheered and hugged each other in joy. Then we went to the student artists whose works were displayed and thanked them again.

“We’re the ones who should be thanking you.”

“Yes, it’s wonderful how you made our art stand out.”

“Thank you for making such a great exhibit for us.”

The students had big smiles on their faces. The guests who were watching rewarded both them and us with a generous round of applause. The hall was filled with a warm atmosphere—but suddenly, everything changed.

Yohei Shinohara had arrived at the scene. It was a well-known fact that he and Sally were enemies. The assistants and guests, who had been smiling and laughing, shut their mouths and gulped. The air in the hall was thick with tension. Sally froze too, surprised by his sudden appearance.

Shinohara stopped in front of her and gently looked her in the eye. “Sally, I want you to answer me honestly,” he said in Japanese.

Most of the people in the room didn’t understand Japanese. They looked at each other in confusion.

“Fine,” Sally replied, also in Japanese.

“What instructions did you give your chief assistant?”

“I told her, ‘Borrow that painting from Yohei Shinohara.’” Sally had a typical foreigner accent, but her Japanese was otherwise impeccable.

“Is that all?”

“I said, ‘Do whatever it takes’ and ‘He’s easily moved.’ That’s all.”

“I see.” Shinohara sighed. “I have one more question. Did you know that the painting’s original owner was me?”

Sally clammed up. Shinohara must have wanted to confirm the truth after our conversation. When I had laid eyes on that Vermeer-esque painting, I’d found myself questioning why it had been brought to Alderley rather than a legitimate auction house. I thought of two possibilities: either it was stolen or the owner purposely chose to put it up for auction at Alderley. In the latter case, there would have to be some circumstance that would make them sell it on the black market. For example, if they wanted to sell it anonymously. If that was true, there was a possibility that the painting had belonged to Shinohara’s father, who was an art collector. In other words, the painting had been in Shinohara’s home.

Shinohara had said that he had lost everything when Japan’s economic bubble burst and his father’s company went bankrupt. He definitely would have been desperate for money. So he had anonymously submitted the possible Vermeer to Alderley and appraised it himself. A genuine Vermeer would go for hundreds of millions—or even billions—of yen, and that huge sum would go straight to him. However, his plan was ruined when Sally declared the painting to be a forgery.

Shinohara must have hated Sally after that. He may have thought that she had sabotaged him out of jealousy over his talent. But there was a high chance that his staged appraisal would have been exposed one day. Who knows what would happen to someone who used a cheap trick to get rich in the underworld? That’s why I suspected that Sally had foiled his plan because she wanted to protect him.

After a while, Sally nodded with a tearful smile. “Yes.”

“How did you know? That painting was my father’s secret treasure. No one knew about it, and I took great care to keep it that way.”

“Don’t you remember? You told me about it before. Not long after we first met, you said, ‘I have a painting that might be by Vermeer. I have faith that it’s real. I want to show it to you someday.’”

Shinohara placed a hand on his forehead. “I said that? I don’t even

remember,” he replied with a self-deprecating laugh. “Because of that, I held a grudge against you for a very long time, even though you were just worried about me...”

Sally looked at him with concerned eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said, bowing to her.

She stood frozen in place, not saying anything.

“And as for that piece, I want it to be displayed in your exhibition. I’m sure it’ll be more suitable there than anywhere else,” he continued, this time in English.

The assistants’ eyes widened. They had tried everything they could think of to get him to lend out the painting, to no avail. They looked at each other, wondering what could have possibly caused this change of heart.

Tears welled up in Sally’s eyes. “Thank you, Yohei,” she said in Japanese. They exchanged a firm handshake.

Everyone who had been watching said, “I don’t know what happened, but it’s good that they’ve reconciled.” They clapped, looking relieved.

Hopkins, who had arrived at the venue at some point, was also clapping happily. He walked up to me and said, “Thank you, Aoi. You’ve truly performed a miracle. Kiyotaka was right: you are a goddess and an angel.” He smiled mischievously and winked.

I shook my head, feeling my cheeks grow hot. “Please don’t say that.”

The party was very peaceful after that. The guests spent their time as they liked, looking at art, chatting with each other, and drinking. The Japanese umbrellas were just as well received as the artworks on display; some proactive guests had already looked for the store’s contact information and called Wagasa on the spot.

“Dad must be crying with joy back at the store. Thank you so much, Aoi,” said Haruka, bowing with sincere happiness.

I shook my head. “Your umbrellas made our exhibit so much better, and you helped out with a lot of things too. I should be the one thanking you.” I bowed back.

“No, really, thank *you*. Can I say that we’re friends now?”

“Huh? I don’t see why not.”

“Yay!”

As we were talking, Sally came up to me, prompting Haruka to scurry away. I greeted her with a bow.

“Aoi, Yohei said you spoke with him,” she said in Japanese.

I gave a vague nod. She looked in Shinohara’s direction.

“I never thought I’d see the day when I’d be able to make up with him. Thank you so much.”

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t do anything worthy of thanks.” It had only been by chance that they’d been able to reconcile.

She giggled. “You’re a very Japanese girl. Modest, earnest, and diligent; never pushy. I love Japanese people like that.” Now that she mentioned it, it did seem like she’d be fond of Japanese people, who valued punctuality and whatnot.

“You’ll be returning soon, right? Did you enjoy New York?”

“Yes.” I nodded. It had been a short but enriching experience. “My only regret is that I couldn’t go to MoMA.” I knew there was nothing to be done about it, but it had still been a shock when I’d found out it was closed for renovations.

Sally smiled. “That’s great. It means you have a reason to come back.”

True, it’s a matter of perspective. I still have something left to do in New York. The next time I visit, I’ll be sure to go to MoMA.

“Aoi, if you want to study in New York, you’re always welcome. I’ll support you. You can work as my assistant while attending school here.”

“Wow, what an opportunity!” exclaimed Yoshie, who had been nearby, listening to our conversation. Next to her, Keiko was pumping her fist.

“Th-Thank you.” I bowed deeply, truly touched and grateful for the offer.

After my conversation with Sally ended, Yoshie came up to me and handed me a champagne glass.

“Well done, Aoi. Remember our first night in Manhattan, when I said that if Sally took a liking to you, you might be able to study here? Who would’ve thought that the offer would really happen? This is amazing,” she said earnestly, sipping her champagne.

I bashfully shrank back. “I think it was mainly because I happened to be able to contribute to their reconciliation...” *Thus allowing Sally to secure the painting she wanted to display so badly.*

“Either way, it’s incredible. Also, it looks like you enjoyed this job a lot. Your face is shining.”

“Shining?” I touched my cheek.

“Yes. You’ve looked a little down lately, so I was worried about you.”

She saw through me. I cast my eyes down. “Yes, I was feeling uneasy.”

“Was there something bothering you?”

“Well...it’s embarrassing to admit, but I’ve been jealous of Holmes’s talent,” I murmured quietly out of shame. It was my first time saying it aloud. Not because I could only confide in Yoshie, but because I’d sorted out my feelings a bit. Now, I’d be able to tell Kaori too.

“I see,” she replied, amused. “You only began to feel that way about him recently, right?”

“Yes.”

“Congratulations, Aoi.”

“Huh?” I stared blankly at her, unable to comprehend why she would say that.

“That means you’ve become closer to him. It’s not human nature to get jealous of someone who feels too far away. You’re close enough to Kiyotaka to be jealous, which means you’ve grown.”

Her words struck a chord in my heart. *That might be true. Before, I was just admiring Holmes. I was chasing him, hoping to get even one step closer to his*

distant form. Now that he's in sight, I feel frustrated and impatient.

"You might be right," I replied. "I'd also lost all confidence in myself, which made my jealousy worse."

"What about now?"

"This trip changed things. I went somewhere without him, completed a job with my colleagues without his advice, and the client was happy with our work. I feel like that really boosted my confidence. I don't feel uneasy like I did before. Right now, I'm just thinking that I wish I could've shown Holmes this exhibit." I laughed and looked at the fruits of our labor.

"I'm sure he would've wanted to see it too. Just look," Yoshie said, gesturing towards the exhibit.

It was still crowded with guests. Among them was a young man wearing a blackish suit. He had glossy black hair, pale skin, and a slim build.

"Huh?" I squinted at the figure. *Wait, could it be?* I gulped.

The man finished viewing the exhibit, exited the venue, and walked towards me.

How? I couldn't comprehend what was going on. *He's supposed to be in Shanghai right now!*

"Aoi," he said, smiling and waving.

Yoshie quietly slipped away.

It was Holmes, without a doubt. I looked up at him, dumbfounded. I couldn't even say anything; I simply gaped in disbelief.

"I'm sorry for startling you. I really wanted to see your exhibit, so I flew over here once my work was done."

"What?!" I exclaimed without thinking. "When did you arrive?"

"I departed from the Shanghai airport last night and landed this morning. I took a proper nap before coming here," he replied, placing a hand on his chest.

I was too shocked to react.

"Aoi..."

“Yes?”

“May I hug—”

Before he could finish his question, I embraced him. I could tell he was surprised, but I couldn't help it; I was driven by impulse. We'd only been apart for a short time, but it felt like I hadn't seen him in ages.

Holmes immediately hugged me back. “I'm glad you're safe and sound,” he said earnestly, holding me tight.

“Safe and sound?” I looked up at him, confused.

“Yes.” He nodded. “This is a foreign country, after all. I was worried about you.”

That's so like him. I smiled.

“And I'm relieved that you aren't angry with me.” From the tone of his voice, he was serious.

“Why would I be angry?” I laughed.

“I'm glad I got to see this wonderful exhibit.”

“I wanted you to see it, so I'm glad too,” I said with a smile.

“Oh no, this is bad,” he murmured, covering his mouth.

“Huh?”

“It's nothing. Would you like to go on a date after the party?” he asked, holding out his hand.

Sally, who was nearby, said, “Your work is finished, so you don't have to stay until the end. Feel free to leave.” She gave an exaggerated shrug and shooed us away with her hand. Everyone laughed at the sight.

Holmes and I looked at each other, nodded, and left the venue hand in hand.

[7] Aoi's Conclusion

1

Holmes said his hotel had a rooftop terrace bar cafe where you could drink while enjoying a nighttime view of Manhattan. Even if you got drunk, you could return to your room without having to walk outside at night. So we decided to have a drink there, and it turned out that Holmes had booked a two-person room just in case.

He really thinks of everything.

We raised our champagne glasses in a toast.

"Come to think of it, we toasted outdoors before you left for Shanghai too," I remarked.

"Yes, although my balcony is a far cry from this hotel's terrace," he replied mirthfully.

Comfortable sofas made up the entirety of the seating at the bar cafe. There were also a lot of tall plants that served as partitions between tables, so despite being in an open space, it felt like we had our own private room. New York jazz music was playing at a moderate volume. The greenery was softly illuminated by footlights, and when I looked up, I saw the sparkling night view of Manhattan.

"This is *the* New York cityscape, huh?" I said.

"Indeed." Holmes nodded and looked at me. "The themed exhibit your group worked on was wonderful. You made the differing genres complement each other splendidly."

"Thank you."

"How did you come up with that concept?"

"Well..." I explained everything that we had gone through: meeting Sally,

receiving our assignment, touring art museums together, and not being able to agree on which of the students' artworks to display. "Since we couldn't come to a consensus, we decided to combine them."

Holmes gave a cheerful nod. "I'm sure it was a lot of work, but it sounds like you had a lot of fun."

"Yes, I did."

"I'm glad to see you so energetic." He put down his glass and looked at me. "Do you find New York to be a fascinating city?"

"Yeah. Manhattan kind of reminds me of Kyoto."

His eyes widened. "How so?"

"The sights are packed into a small area, making it really easy to understand the city's layout. If Central Park is the Kyoto Imperial Palace, then Grand Central is around where city hall is."

"Would Times Square be Shijo?"

"Yes. And the Upper East End is Rakuhoku, while SoHo is around Fushimi."

"That's rather forced," Holmes said with a laugh.

"And since Kyoto was also a former capital, it adopted various cultures that came from elsewhere, and they all blend together well enough that it never feels superficial or forced. New York has a welcoming atmosphere for outsiders, and Kyoto prides itself on its hospitality towards visitors."

"I see. Despite seeming completely different, they do have their similarities."

"Yeah." I laughed.

"I heard from Keiko that Sally invited you to study in New York."

"Yes." I nodded.

"I was expecting such an offer to be made," he said calmly. I had expected him to be more surprised. "I think it's a great career opportunity for you. If you want to do it, you should accept."

My eyes widened in shock at his unexpected response.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Oh, I just didn’t think you’d say that. I thought you’d gently object to it.”

“Up until recently, I would’ve had to force myself to be strong while saying those words. But I’ve had a change of heart, so now I can say them with sincerity,” he said in a composed tone. He seemed to be telling the truth.

“A change of heart?” I looked at him, bewildered.

“I think I’ll wait until another time to explain in detail. For now, just know that although I was truly worried about you going to another country by yourself, I also thought, ‘As long as you’re doing well, it’s fine if you won’t stay by my side.’ I’ll visit you anywhere in the world if you’ll allow me to, and I’ll wait forever in Kyoto for your return.”

He’s encouraging me to study abroad even though he’s been worried about my safety? That feels like a contradiction. He said he’d explain another time, so maybe something happened.

“Also, I realized something,” he continued.

“Huh?”

“You’ve been wanting to get away from me...and wondering if we should stay engaged, haven’t you? I pretended not to notice,” he said with a self-deprecating laugh. When I didn’t answer, he smiled cheerfully and added, “So please don’t worry about me. If possible, I’d rather not cancel our engagement, but you should decide for yourself what you want to do. I’ll fully support your decision.”

“Okay.” I nodded and looked at him. “I was truly honored and happy to receive Sally’s offer. But coming to New York made me realize something.”

Holmes silently awaited my next words.

“I learned a lot from meeting people who work at the forefront of one of the leading cities in the art world. It was really inspiring. But...”

“But?” He tilted his head.

I looked him straight in the eye and said, “I want to learn from you, Holmes. I never thought for a second that you were inferior to these influential figures.

It's only because of your teachings that a clueless amateur like me was able to become Sally's honor student. I still haven't learned enough from you. I want to absorb your knowledge."

I had politely declined Sally's offer, telling her that I still wanted to study in Japan for now. To be honest, Holmes was a more appealing teacher than she was.

Holmes's eyes widened. He seemed to have been rendered speechless. He gulped and asked, "Don't you think it would be a shame to let this chance go to waste?"

"I'm still just a fledgling. Personally, I think it would be a shame to *not* be able to learn from you during this crucial time."

He reacted with a start.

"New York is an incredible city. I'd love to take an opportunity like this. But I want to be with you."

New York had fascinated me. But coming here had confirmed to me that Japan was a wonderful place. I loved living in Kyoto, and I thought it was just as great. If I found myself really wanting to study abroad in the future, I could figure it out then.

Yoshie had waited for a break in her child-rearing before living in New York. Rikyu seemed to feel bad for her, but I didn't think of it that way. For Yoshie, raising her child was also a dream that she didn't want to let go of. Both dreams were irreplaceable to her, and I thought that was a wonderful and luxurious mindset.

Life is long; there's no need to cram everything into your twenties. I want to get rid of the illusion that chances only come when you're young—that if you miss them, your dreams will never come true.

"I realized again that even without romantic feelings, I still love you, Holmes. When I'm with you, everything I see and touch feels more beautiful."

Wherever we went, whatever we saw, Holmes would always be moved, and at some point, I'd feel the same way. Focusing on the things that moved me completely changed how I viewed everything I'd seen before. It was as if I'd

been transported to another world where everything shone brighter.

Holmes fell silent for a while. Then he placed a hand over his mouth and said, "Aoi..."

"Yes?"

"May I cry?"

"What?" My eyes widened.

"To be honest, I've been worried for a long time. I sensed that you wanted to get away from me. Rather than continuing to be anxious about when you'd bring it up, I wondered if I should say the final words myself..." His hand trembled. Despite saying he wasn't forcing himself to be strong, he had actually been putting on the bravest front he could...all for my sake.

"Thank you." I gently touched his silky hair, held him to my chest, and patted his head.

"Thank you too. I'll do my best to keep you feeling that way."

When I had heard that line before my trip, I had thought, "Please don't work even harder," because I had been scared of falling even further behind. But now, it was different. I wanted to have him as my goal forever.

There'll surely come another time when I'm forced to recognize the difference in skill between us. I'll be jealous of your talent, lose confidence in myself, and feel bitter again. But as long as we can keep living, encouraging each other to improve...

We exchanged a soft kiss, out of view of the others around us.

*

Before coming to New York, I had been torn between my love for and jealousy of Holmes. There had been many times when it felt painful to be with him. But that night, I moved on from it all. I was able to purely be happy spending time with him.

I nuzzled the crook of his neck and we laughed about being perfectly fitting puzzle pieces. We pressed our foreheads together, intertwined our fingers, and brought our lips together, confirming our love for each other.

It was a night full of happiness.

Short Story: Emotions Washed Away

It had been a few days since Aoi had left for her trip.

“I wonder what Aoi’s doing in New York right now,” Kaori Miyashita murmured to herself as she walked along the riverside. She had just gotten out of a party held by her seminar class in Gion.

Around Shijo Street and Sanjo Street, there were couples sitting and chatting, as was typical along the Kamo River. But they dwindled in number as she went farther north, especially since the sun was already setting.

As she walked, she absentmindedly thought of Keigo Kohinata. They had gone for tea after she had returned from Australia. Updating each other on their current lives had been a lot of fun. She was grateful to him for encouraging her to go on the short-term study abroad.

“Were you able to move on?” he asked.

Kaori nodded. “Yeah. It was really refreshing and it let me put my feelings behind me.”

“Is it all right for me to extend my offer again, then?”

“Huh?”

“Kaori, would you like to go out with me?”

The first emotion that came to her was not happiness. It was closer to distress—the feeling of not wanting to turn down a request from someone who had been so supportive of her. She clammed up.

He chuckled and said, “Oh, sorry. I guess it’s still too early. I’ll wait a little longer.”

His words weighed heavily on her heart. At this rate, she might eventually say yes just because she felt bad about making him wait. If she was thinking that way, then it must’ve not been love.

Kaori shook her head and said gently, "Sorry, Kohinata. Please don't wait for me."

"Huh?"

"I admire you, but I don't think it's like that."

He fell silent for a while before scratching his head and saying, "Oh. All right. It's unfortunate, but thanks for making it clear." He laughed weakly, a mature adult until the very end.

"He really is a good guy. Why couldn't I fall in love with him?"

Kaori smiled self-deprecatingly as she reflected on the conversation. Before she knew it, her surroundings had become dark. Had she already walked as far as Marutamachi Street? Feeling that the empty, shadowy riverside might be dangerous, she decided to go up to the street.

"Uurgh!"

As she looked for the nearest stairs, she heard what sounded like a groaning voice. She frowned, finding it strange. Was this some kind of supernatural phenomenon? Various rumors surrounding the Kamo River swirled around in her head.

"Hngh..."

She looked in the direction of the voice and saw a man sitting on a bench next to a large tree. He was hunched over, covering his face with one hand. Kaori was relieved that it wasn't a ghost, but now she worried that he wasn't feeling well.

"Um, are you okay?" she asked.

She heard a snuffle and immediately regretted calling out to him, as it turned out he was crying rather than groaning in pain.

Oh drat, I did something rude.

She tried to leave, but before she could, the man slowly looked up.

"Oh!" they both exclaimed at the same time. They recognized each other.

“H-Haruhiko?”

The man was Haruhiko Kajiware, a graduate student at her university and the younger brother of actor Akihito Kajiware. Unlike the flashy Akihito, Haruhiko had a gentle and soft aura. He was still quite handsome, though. He was also dating Akari Meguro, a member of the flower arranging club Kaori was in.

“Kaori?” he murmured in a daze. His face was a mess of tears and snot.

“Hello.” She bowed.

“What’re you doing here? Did Akari say something?”

“No, I happened to be taking a walk. Did something happen between you and Meguro?”

Kaori hurriedly took out a pack of pocket tissues and ran up to Haruhiko, who accepted it and apologized as he wiped his eyes and nose.

“So, Akari broke up with me...”

“Huh?” Kaori’s eyes widened.

“I knew something was wrong because she’s been avoiding me lately.” He sighed and cast his eyes down. “Today was her birthday. This place is full of memories for us, so I was hoping we could make a fresh start here, but she told me, ‘Sorry, I can’t go. I realized there’s someone who’s really important to me.’” Tears welled up in his eyes as he spoke.

“I see...”

Meguro was the one who fell in love with Haruhiko first, so it’s surprising that she would be the one to break things off. But I guess that’s just something that happens.

“I realized there’s someone who’s really important to me.”

Those words lingered in Kaori’s mind. They implied that it wasn’t a new person who had appeared in Meguro’s life, but someone she had already known.

Who is it? What if it’s—no, it couldn’t be.

“Sorry you have to see me like this,” said Haruhiko, tears streaming down his

face as he hung his head again. "I know it's embarrassing, but if I don't cry now, I won't be able to move on."

As he said, this normally would have been a pathetic display. But it was the result of his earnest feelings. Kaori could tell that he had seriously been in love. She sat next to him and looked up at the sky. There was a vivid white moon that night.

"I think that's good," she said. "You should cry it all out."

"Thanks," he murmured with a sob.

Kaori remembered the final sad smile Kohinata had shown her, and her heart ached. Did he cry for her too? Her nose twitched, but she clenched her fists to hold back her tears, knowing it wouldn't be right to break down.

"You know, I have times when I want to cry too," she murmured. "But I can't."

Haruhiko twitched and looked up. "Why not?"

"I'm in the same position as Meguro. There was someone who told me he liked me. He was a really great guy and I admired him. I wanted to fall in love with him, but I just couldn't, and I ended up hurting him. It makes me want to cry, but I don't have the right to." She faked a laugh.

"That's not true." Haruhiko shook his head. "I think love...is equally painful for both the rejecter and the rejected. It's just a different kind of pain. The more you admire the person, the more painful it is to reject them. I don't think it's your fault that you can't accept his feelings."

Kaori fell silent.

Haruhiko looked firmly at her. "You've been hurting too, right?" he asked sympathetically, his eyes and the tip of his nose swollen and red.

The sight of him made her heart ache. "Yes," she said, her tears bursting through the dam.

The swiftly flowing Kamo River seemed to wash away their pain.

Epilogue

Yes, I realized a long time ago that Aoi wanted to get away from me.

“Well then, I’m off.”

When I triumphantly ran out of the Shanghai hotel, I was elated. I had gotten Shiro Kikukawa arrested, finished my appraisal work, and seen Ensho off on his new start.

I boarded the last flight of the day, wanting nothing but to see Aoi as soon as possible. But shortly after takeoff, I was suddenly overcome with anxiety. I had noticed something was off after summer break, and I didn’t know what had triggered it. Perhaps the start of the new semester had changed something in her. She had become more distant. There was an invisible wall between us that had not been there before, and it seemed that I was the only one who felt it. She didn’t appear to notice.

While spending time with her, I had subtly sounded her out to ascertain her feelings. At first, I feared that she had fallen in love with someone else. However, that didn’t seem to be the case. Then came the New York offer. I volunteered to go with her, but she firmly declined, albeit apologetically. That made me realize that I was almost like her guardian. She had met me when she was still in high school, and at some point, we had become an item. She was advancing in the blink of an eye, and just as children started rebelling against their parents as they grew up, perhaps she was wanting to put some distance between us as well.

However, that was all speculation on my part. Despite being praised for my observation skills, I was hopeless when it came to love. My head was filled with insecure and pessimistic thoughts. Because of this weakness of mine, I always assumed the worst so that I wouldn’t be too shocked by anything...even though I could have been worrying over nothing at all.

At my father's apartment in Yasaka, before I was to leave for Shanghai, I mentioned to Aoi, "My father sometimes says that if I get married, he might leave this apartment to me and go back to Tokyo."

She murmured, "It'll be a bit sad to see him go," giggled, and then said, "Well, it won't be for a long time."

It seemed like marriage wasn't something that Aoi thought about realistically. It was an uncertainty, like a distant promise that would be nice to fulfill one day. I had known that, but the difference in our levels of enthusiasm still made me depressed. I unconsciously placed a hand on my forehead, at which she peered into my face and asked, "What's wrong?"

Her reaction was endearing yet frustrating. Without thinking, I replied, "Personally, I'd marry you right this moment if I could," testing her. I'll never forget the expression she made just then: troubled and uncertain.

I panicked. At this rate, I might make her realize something she doesn't know about her true feelings. So I quickly laughed and said, "I'm just kidding. I'm still in training and you're still a student. Like you said, it's still too early." I wanted to put her at ease. I was afraid that if she felt like I was a burden, she would instantly leave me.

"Yeah, I'm not ready yet."

Her obvious relief made my heart ache. At the same time, I felt bad that my thoughts of marriage might be a burden on her.

As I felt myself sinking further into depression, Aoi blushed slightly, smiled, and murmured, "I think it's too early, but it makes me really happy to hear that from the person I love."

I thought my heart was going to stop. I was suddenly hit with relief, as if the ice had all melted at once. Aoi still loved me. It didn't change the fact that she was different from before, though. Perhaps she didn't realize that deep down, she wanted to get away from me. No, it was possible that she did but was ignoring it out of kindness and consideration for me.

She was going to go to New York—an exciting, inspiring city—in that state of mind. She was going to see people at the forefront of the art industry and

realize just how small her world was. She was going to discover everything she had been hiding and deceiving herself about.

There was a possibility that she would be overcome by a desire to study abroad. Either way, it was clear that my existence was tying her down.

I took a deep breath, leaned back in my seat, and closed my eyes.

If that's how it's going to be anyway, I want to send her off with positive feelings. If I pressured her into staying with me, I wouldn't be able to secure her heart.

When I had found out that Shiro Kikukawa was targeting Aoi's life, I had strongly felt that as long as she was safe, I wouldn't want for anything else.

I steeled my resolve as I flew to the States.

The flight was roughly fourteen and a half hours. I wasn't sure if it felt long or short. Upon arriving in New York, I first checked into my hotel and decided to get a good rest. Rikyu had been reporting Aoi's schedule to me. Today was the preopening party for the exhibition that she had worked on.

"Color me shocked. Weren't you supposed to be in Shanghai? You didn't tell Aoi you were coming, did you?"

Keiko gave an amused laugh. She seemed to have a softer vibe than the last time I had met her. I had contacted her to get permission to attend the party.

"The honor students' themed exhibit is this way," she said, taking me there.

I was a bit surprised when I saw their work. I had been expecting an elegant gallery of the pieces they liked, but instead, I got contemporary fantasy art, Art Nouveau that paid homage to European art, and Japonism filled with an American's admiration for Japan—three completely different genres skillfully put together in a way where they complemented each other. The Japanese umbrellas were incorporated wonderfully as well. Since the artists and the curators were all students, the exhibit conveyed youthful energy and an earnest love for the arts.

I was about to remark that it was brilliant, but Keiko got to it first.

“Isn’t it brilliant?” she asked proudly.

“Yes, it really is. It exceeded my expectations.”

We both nodded.

“I need to apologize to you and Aoi,” she said.

“Apologize?”

“I think very highly of you, so I was never able to approve of you choosing Aoi. But after spending this time with her, I realized how amazing she is.”

“Does that mean you recognize her talent?”

“That’s part of it, but...you see, according to the assistants who invited Chloe and Amelie—the other honor students—those two are the egotistical and picky type. They’re normally hard to deal with, but when Aoi came between them, the atmosphere became friendly. She’s soft like a cushion, so she prevented them from clashing. And she states her opinions clearly, keeping the group in order, but it never felt like she was being pushy.”

I nodded silently as I listened. Aoi did have that side to her. She was reserved but she always lightened the mood.

“I didn’t even like her, but before I knew it, she’d charmed both me and the fussy Sally.” Keiko giggled and looked at me. Perhaps it was Aoi’s influence that had changed her vibe. “You have a great girlfriend.”

“Thank you. I agree.” I gave a composed smile.

“Sally might take her from you, though.”

She told me about Sally’s offer to Aoi. I had been expecting that somewhere deep down, so I wasn’t surprised. But I was truly glad to know about it in advance.

When I finished viewing the exhibit, Aoi happened to be looking my way. Her eyes were like saucers, and I couldn’t help but grin. I’d wanted to surprise her, but I hadn’t expected *this* good of a reaction.

I walked up to her and tried to ask for a hug. Knowing her, she would surely be flustered and say, “Not here.” However, before I could finish my question, she hugged me tightly. I was happy, but at the same time, I knew it must’ve meant that she’d made up her mind. *It’s a good thing I did too.*

Later, while we were having a drink at my hotel’s terrace bar cafe, I mentioned that Keiko had told me about Sally’s offer. I smiled and encouraged her to accept it.

“So please don’t worry about me. If possible, I’d rather not cancel our engagement, but you should decide for yourself what you want to do. I’ll fully support your decision,” I said, still smiling.

I’m sure she’ll say, “Thank you. I’ll keep what you taught me in my heart and do my best in New York.”

“Okay.” She nodded and looked at me.

I gulped. My hands felt like they were going to start trembling, but I acted calm.

“I was truly honored and happy to receive Sally’s offer. But coming to New York made me realize something. I learned a lot from meeting people who work at the forefront of one of the leading cities in the art world. It was really inspiring.”

I nodded. *I’m sure it was.*

“But...”

I met her gaze and saw that she was looking straight at me, her eyes as clear as they used to be before she began to avoid looking me in the eye.

“I want to learn from you, Holmes.”

My jaw dropped.

“I never thought for a second that you were inferior to these influential figures. It’s only because of your teachings that a clueless amateur like me was able to become Sally’s honor student. I still haven’t learned enough from you. I want to absorb your knowledge.”

For a second, I didn't know what she was saying. It took some time for my brain to process the words I had just heard. Rather than being happy, however, I couldn't accept it.

"Don't you think it would be a shame to let this chance go to waste?"

Aoi giggled and said, "I'm still just a fledgling. Personally, I think it would be a shame to *not* be able to learn from you during this crucial time."

I was stunned speechless.

"New York is an incredible city. I'd love to take an opportunity like this. But I want to be with you."

She chose me, not Sally. She chose me over New York's temptations. What do I do now? I can't hold back these tears of joy.

"May I cry?" I asked.

Aoi's eyes widened. I wasn't joking. There really were tears welling up in my eyes.

I'm so pathetic. What happened to steeling my resolve?

I realized just how much I had been forcing myself to seem stronger than I really was. And yet I hadn't wanted to make her stay by my side. My mother had passed away despite my desperate prayers. That was when I had learned that no matter how much you begged for someone to stay, there was no stopping those who left. I wanted Aoi to be free. It was fine if we had to be in a long-distance relationship. If I restricted her freedom because I didn't want to let her go only for her heart to distance herself from me, it would defeat the purpose.

At least, that was what I had thought, but when I found out that Aoi had chosen to stay by my side, the tears flowed out on their own. I looked down.

"Thank you," she said.

My heart burned with admiration. "Thank you too. I'll do my best to keep you feeling that way."

I sincerely meant it. At the same time, I felt that no matter where she went in the world, as long as our hearts were connected like this, I would be fine.

We exchanged a kiss and hugged each other tightly. Having straightened things out between us, it was a very happy and passionate night...but I would like to keep the rest of it our secret.

*

The next morning, I noticed my phone had a new message and reached for the sideboard, careful to stay under the blanket. I glanced to my side and saw that Holmes wasn't there. He seemed to be taking a shower.

I yawned and checked my phone. The sender was Komatsu.

"Komatsu?"

I rubbed my eyes as I opened the message.

"I know the kiddo visited you out of nowhere, but don't be angry with him. He went through hell in order to protect you."

"Huh?" I furrowed my brow at the opening sentences.

The rest of the message detailed everything that had happened in Shanghai. My eyes widened at the shocking truth.

*

"I can't believe it," I said, remembering Komatsu's message. "I wish you would've told me what was going on."

Holmes and I were taking a walk in Central Park. Today was the public opening of Light and Shadow: Vermeer and Meegeren. After seeing the exhibition at the building on Fifth Avenue, we had decided to go to Central Park, where we were now walking hand in hand.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to trouble you when you were supposed to be enjoying yourself in New York," he said apologetically.

It was true that knowing I was being targeted would have made me uneasy.

"Rikyu believed that since he didn't sense any tension or dangerous intent, the person was probably a hired photographer who was simply taking pictures from afar. A professional assassin would cost quite a lot of money, while a photographer is all you need if you want pictures for extortion."

“I see...” I nodded. “So that’s why Rikyu was following me all the time. It’s my fault he never got to do his own thing. I’ll have to thank him.”

“I plan on making it up to him too. He said he had fun, though. And it seems that thanks to you, he was finally able to get together with Haruka after spending a long time in the friend zone.” Holmes chuckled.

“Oh, yeah. I’m happy for them too.” I nodded firmly.

We continued to walk around. I had compared Central Park to the Kyoto Imperial Palace earlier, but this park was even bigger and had more greenery. Ducks were swimming leisurely in the large pond, while squirrels scurried across branches. There were a lot of joggers and people walking their dogs.

“Oh, right. I heard that Yoshie lived in New York for a short time. I didn’t know that,” I said.

“Yes, it was when Rikyu was in France. My grandfather was secretly depressed because he didn’t think she’d ever come back.”

“Really?”

“Yes, so he was truly happy when she returned. Just like I am.” He squeezed my hand and peered into my face.

“Oh, you.” I laughed. “I’m sure Yoshie was happy too.”

“My grandfather isn’t as honest as me, so he didn’t openly rejoice over her return. He said, ‘I was too busy with my antiques to even notice you were gone,’ to which Yoshie took great offense.”

I recalled the party where I had first met Yoshie. Back then, she had said there was a time when he was so obsessed with an antique that it made her want to break it. *This must’ve been what she was talking about.* I laughed to myself.

The surface of the pond sparkled, giving off a gentle light.

“The Vermeer and Meegeren exhibit was wonderful,” Holmes remarked.

“Yes.” I nodded. “What did you think of the painting with conflicting appraisals?”

“It was extremely difficult to tell. It looked like an authentic Vermeer, but it

also made me think it could be a masterful Meegeren imitation. If it was Meegeren, I think he painted it at a time when he was happy. That light wasn't present in his known paintings."

Holmes didn't outright state one or the other, but I could tell that he thought it might've been Meegeren.

"Oh, right," he said after a little while, taking his phone out of his pocket. "I wanted to show you Ensho's painting."

Komatsu's message had explained the whole situation with Taisei Ashiya.

"I was curious about it," I replied as we sat down on a bench and looked at the picture.

The painting depicted the beautiful Jiangnan Garden and a Chinese palace looking fantastical below a round moon. In the lower left, soldiers were drinking alcohol and talking. In the upper right, there was a terrace with the silhouette of a court lady looking at the moon.

A Chinese poem was written at the edge of the painting:

Exquisite wine, luminescent cups

We try to drink and the lute on horseback encourages us

If we lie drunk in the desert, you must not laugh

For how many have been sent to war since ancient times?

His painting ability was as awe-inspiring as ever. I had felt the same way with the Suzhou painting on display at Kura.

"Wow..."

Even though I was looking at it on a phone screen, I was nearly moved to tears. Ensho had worked hard to try to become an appraiser like Holmes, and after a long struggle, he had finally found the right path. I was happy for his new start.

He might be a bit similar to the manager.

"Oh, it's almost time," Holmes said, standing up.

I nodded and followed suit. I was going to say goodbye to Sally before flying

back to Japan in the afternoon. It seemed that Rikyu would be staying here a little longer.

“You can stay in New York a bit too if you want,” I said.

“What are you talking about? I came here to pick you up. Now, let’s go.” He held out his hand, which I took.

We walked through Central Park, where the trees were already changing color, getting a head start on autumn.

Afterword

Thank you for reading. I'm Mai Mochizuki.

The year 2020 features the series's first double release across consecutive months, with volume 13 coming out in January and volume 14 in February (in Japan). To be honest, the original plan was to release both books at the same time, but I didn't make the deadline, so it became a consecutive release instead.

I visited New York in September 2019, which happened to line up perfectly with the in-universe timing of this book. I was truly moved by the city. As I stared in awe at Manhattan's buildings, I thought, "If I'd come here when I was a student, I would've done whatever it took to be able to live here." I had a hard time with the subway ticket gates, and as I relished the deliciousness of the coffee and beer, I thought, "I could live on these alone." I was essentially Yoshie.

Now then, continuing from Kiyotaka's Shanghai arc, this volume is Aoi's New York arc. I was able to write Komatsu's perspective of Kiyotaka in Shanghai at a good pace, but Aoi's New York arc was quite difficult and took longer. I struggled with handling her inner conflict of being in love with Kiyotaka while also being jealous of his talent.

As I was writing, I myself didn't know what conclusion she would reach. And regardless of her decision, I didn't want to forcefully twist the way the story played out. The result is what you see here. This volume is a story that shines the spotlight on our protagonist's internal conflict, struggle, and growth. (Also, I've had Rikyu's situation with his childhood friend in mind for a while now, so I'm overjoyed that I finally got to write it.)

Everything about volume 13 and 14 is different from the rest of the series, from the setting to the plot development to the chapter structure, but I hope you'll think of them as special overseas episodes. I struggled a lot in constructing these two books, and because of that, I feel very attached to them.

In the end, I had a lot of fun writing them. I hope they gave you a bit of a simulated trip abroad.

As usual, please let me use this space to express my thanks to all of the connections surrounding myself and this series. Thank you all so much.

Mai Mochizuki

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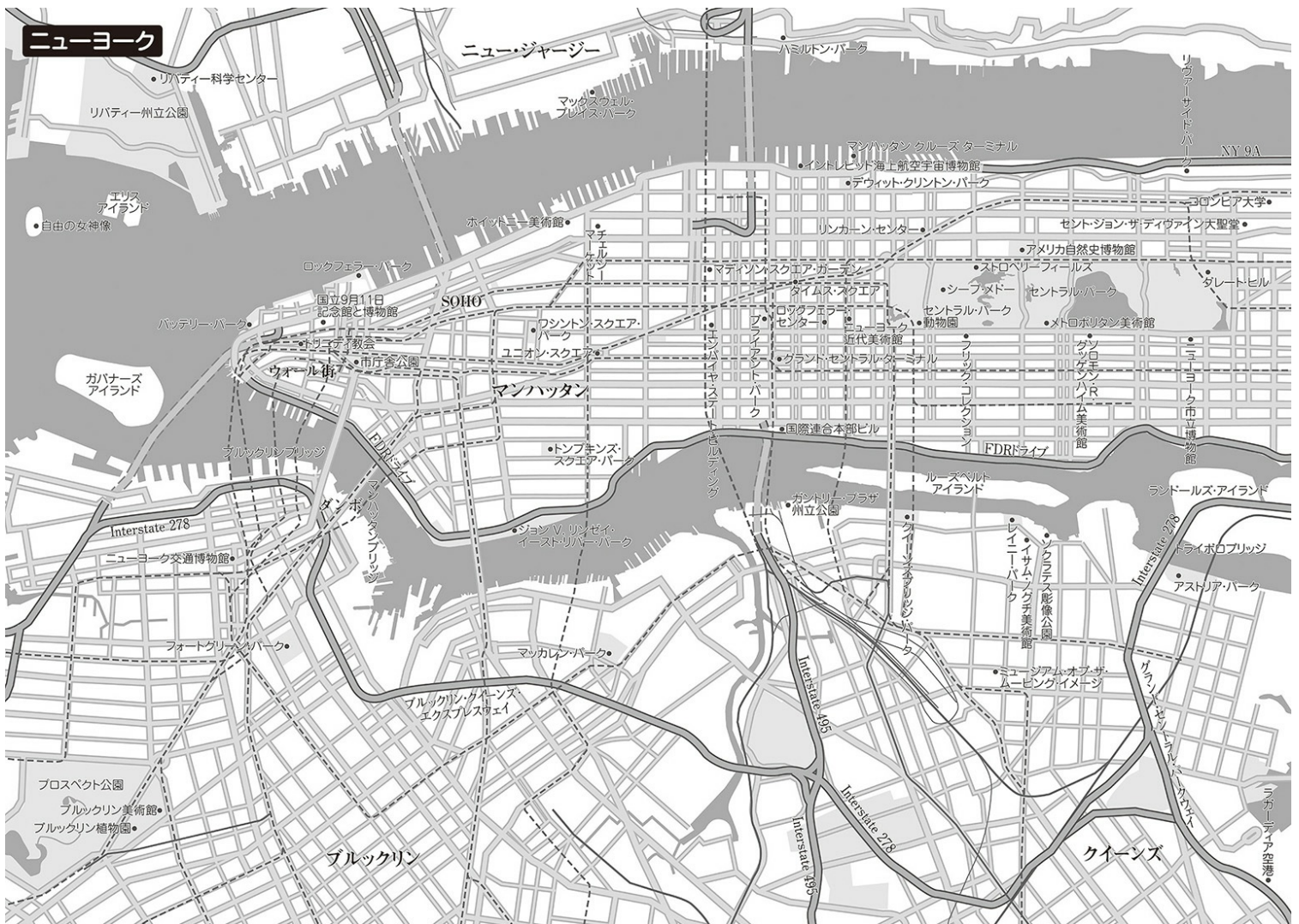


Kiyotaka and Aoi in Yasaka



Rikyu in Manhattan

Map of New York City





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by Mai Mochizuki

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